

AMONG THE WOMEN OF THE SAHARA



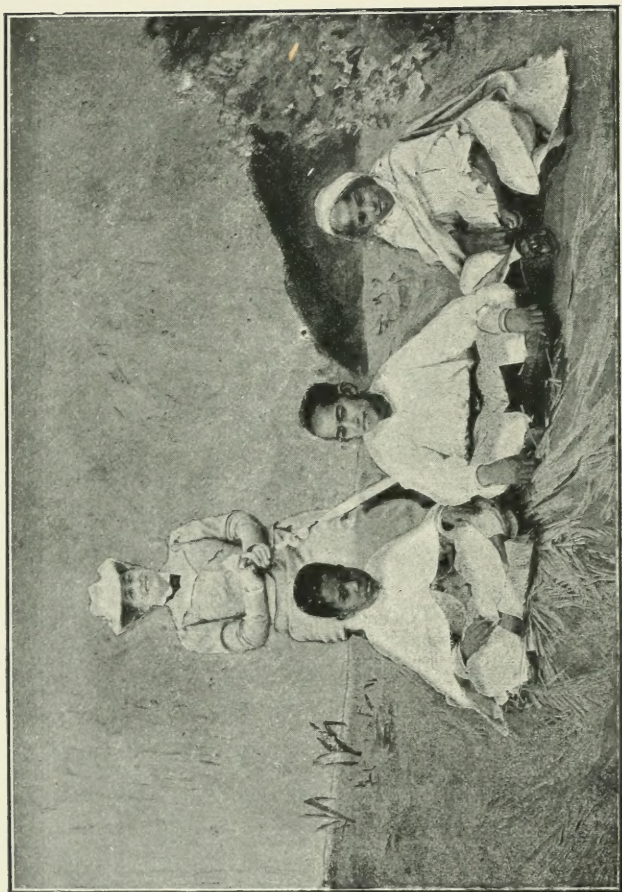
MRS. ARTHUR BELL

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AMONG THE WOMEN OF THE SAHARA



THREE OF THE AUTHOR'S FRIENDS.

Among the Women of the Sahara

From the French of

MME. JEAN POMMEROL

BY

MRS. ARTHUR BELL (N. D'ANVERS)

AUTHOR OF

"THE ELEMENTARY HISTORY OF ART" ETC

With Ninety Illustrations, after Drawings and Photographs by the Author

LONDON

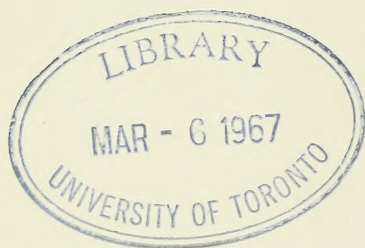
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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE.

THIS brightly-written narrative of several months' wandering in the Sahara between El-Aghuat and In-Saleh, forms a really unique revelation of a phase, or rather of several phases, of life hitherto little known to Europeans. Madame Pommerol, with a courage and perseverance worthy of Mrs. Bishop herself, penetrated into homes in *dawar* and *kasr* jealously closed as a rule to all outsiders, sometimes succeeding in making friends with the inmates and sometimes having to beat a hasty retreat, so fierce was their hostility. She has given the results of her experience in a series of very vivid word-pictures, supplemented by sketches and photographs taken under great difficulties, for the women of the Sahara look upon the camera as an uncanny sentient being with the power of the evil eye, and moreover they consider it a positive crime to allow their portraits to be taken. In spite of all opposition, however, many evidently good likenesses of typical faces were obtained by the indomitable traveller, and will no doubt add greatly to the value of her book amongst all students of character.

NANCY BELL.

20, QUAI ESPAGNOL, BRUGES.

September, 1900.

CONTENTS.

CHAP.	PAGE
I.—WHO ARE THEY?	I
II.—FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF THE ARAB RACE	13
III.—BEAUTY AMONGST THE ARABS	25
IV.—A DIFFICULT CHAPTER	41
V.—MORE ABOUT EL-AGHUAT	49
VI.—THE WOMEN OF THE KUSÛR	79
VII.—THE WADY M'ZAB AND THE SEVEN HOLY CITIES	111
VIII.—AMONG THE MOZABITE WOMEN	138
IX.—NEGRESS SLAVES	161
X.—THE QUEST FOR WATER AMONGST THE NOMAD ARABS	171
XI.—ABOUT BIRTH AND MARRIAGE AMONGST THE ARAB TRIBES	181
XII.—DIVORCE IN THE SAHARA	215
XIII.—WARGLA: THE PEARL OF THE OASES	229
XIV.—FROM TUGGURT TO IN-SALAH	245
XV.—LIFE IN THE DAWAR AMONGST THE NOMAD ARAB TRIBES	269
XVI.—ABOUT THE CAMELS OF THE NOMAD ARAB TRIBES	309
XVII.—ON THE IDEAS OF THE SAHARIAN WOMEN	325

AMONG THE WOMEN OF THE SAHARA

CHAPTER I.

WHO ARE THEY ?

To the question with which I have headed this first chapter of my account of my sojourn amongst the women of the Sahara, the fact that I am of their sex enables me to give a very true reply ; for as a woman I have been able to learn to know them well, to understand their unformed characters, breathing the same air as they do, camping upon the same sands, and honoured by their intense and perhaps too demonstrative friendship.

In every great tribe, in every small sedentary community, the women have their own special costume, their own peculiar amulets, their own manners and customs, setting them apart from every other group. Their dispositions, too, are modified by circumstances ; some gaining courage from their surroundings, whilst others grow more timid. Their figures, always supple, become thinner

or plumper as the case may be. Their complexions are either sallow, tanned, nor pink ; but, in spite of these superficial differences of form or feature, their characters are radically the same, bearing the unmistakable impress of the terrible climate, the restricted conditions of their life, and of the stern



Mussulman faith, professed for some nine centuries at the least, by all the races of the Desert.

Frivolous, childish and cunning, these women have no scruples, for they themselves believe the doctrine of Mohammed, that they have scarcely so much as half a soul apiece. Their natures are, in fact, as I have just remarked in other words, quite undeveloped ; and although they are remarkably plastic, they are incomplete, in the same sense as is a statue roughly outlined in the block. Greedy,

voluptuous, spiteful and untruthful though they be, they are yet morally superior to the Arab and Berber women of the Tell, or Algerian Sahara. They have the proud, free carriage, so unlike that of their sisters of the North, of women accustomed to live in the open air. When young, there is something alike of the cat, the gazelle, and the antelope about them. They are indeed infinitely interesting, but much in the same way as are the animals to which I have compared them.

Their black or greenish eyes, enlarged with *kohl** from the very day of their birth, full of combined fascination, reticence and mystery, have never looked upon any other scene than the vast and gloomy stretch of white sand of their native land, broken only here and there by a few rocks or the declivities known as dunes, dotted with tufts of the grasses called *diss* and *drinn*, which are green for a short time in spring, but dry and grey for the rest of the year, and grow in considerable quantities at wide intervals, the sand collecting behind them. The only tree, and that of very rare occurrence, is the palm, decorative enough, no doubt, but somewhat melancholy. No variety anywhere, except the scattered bones of dead camels, and over all the fierce sun, rising and setting in a furnace of a sky implacably blue.

* This is the *stibium*, or antimony, with which the eyelashes are painted.—TRANS.

The eyes of these women have scarcely seen any shade but that thrown by the scattered tents or the yet more melancholy mud houses of their tribe ; and there are actually women of the towns—and oh, what towns those are !—who have never entered a tent, and other women of the desert who have never been inside a house. As a matter of course



the range of their ideas is restricted, and their vocabulary is as limited as are their thoughts.

They know, for instance, that their fingers spin the fleece of the sheep and the coarse hair of the camels ; they know, too, who dyes the wool, who weaves it, and who knots it into fringes ; for it is their own industrious hands which prepare the colours, wring out the dye, and, in a word, get

the raw material into shape for the market. But their knowledge stops there ; they do not know who makes the cotton stuffs and silk handkerchiefs brought to the desert by caravans. Understand well what I mean ; they don't know whether it is a man, an angel, a demon, or what they call a *jinn*, who produces these things. Of course, however, I am only speaking of those whom our effete civilization has not yet touched, or given a smattering either of its science or its vice ; and these include the greater number, in fact, the mass, of the true women of the true Sahara.

The dreary expanse of their native land does not, however, suppress their gaiety. Their laugh still rings out high and clear. The narrow limits of the tent or of the clay hut do not shackle the freedom of their movements ; the poverty of their language does not prevent them from instinctively recognizing the innate poetry of the songs they transmit from generation to generation. And about them there is a something—I know not what, so difficult is it to define—irresistibly attractive to us Europeans, which is better than intelligence, and better than physical beauty. It is, maybe, that perfect resignation (after more than one crisis of furious revolt) to their fate, as fixed by the angel-writer, the scribe of Allah himself, combined with the absolute harmony of their voices, their smiles, their gestures, their costumes and their ornaments, with the piquant and

fascinating environment, which has made them what they are.

Gladly would I plunge at once into the subject of the inner life of the women about whom I am writing, for I know well that one carefully observed fact is worth any amount of theory. But in this case to abridge would really involve spinning out ; for to understand the great diversity of customs it is necessary, to begin with, to get a clear notion of the diversity of origins. I remember well what perplexities, or rather what maddening confusion, resulted at the beginning of my journey from my ignorance about differences of race ; a confusion which I can save others from sharing, by two or three pages of explanation ; pages the reader is free to skip, if he or she be impatient or already well up in the subject.

About Race then. Race is a most important matter, the one chief factor in all the distinctions not levelled away by the climate of the Sahara, but to which those who study the country—still so little known—whether on the spot or from a distance, give far too little attention. Indeed, certain there be who confuse the Arab with the Berber race, and no one has ever looked upon the latter as aboriginal. As a matter of fact, however, it is the outcome of the fusion of several races from Asia, mixed in the North of Africa with Iberian, Etruscan, Carthaginian and Pelasgic elements, with a strain of the true

aboriginal race, still almost a sealed book to science, yet of which undeniable traces have been recognized. In the South, the so-called Berbers have added to all these diverse elements certain Ethiopian, Egyptian, Persian and Tyrrhenian infiltrations. All the tribes of the Tigris and Euphrates basins, all those living on the Lower and the Upper Nile, have contributed their contingents of fugitive slaves and of refugees fleeing for safety in time of war. As a result, certain modern Saharian women are really incarnations in the present day, of races who have been swept away and are looked upon as extinct.

It seems a pity to neglect the opinion of Sallust on such a subject as the Berber race, for he was well-informed and cautious—too cautious, it is said, to be fully relied on. But he was pro-consul of Africa, and the embezzlements with which he was charged, and which, by the way, were never proved, do not in the least detract from the value of his observations. The Governor of a province, then looked upon as barbarous, exiled from Rome, consumed with ennui, he devoted himself to cross-questioning the “ancients” of the country as a distraction. He investigated the old traditions, even then beginning to die out, as he himself explains, and I am quite at a loss to imagine what motive he could have for insincerity. Now, according to him, the Moors of Mauritania (the present Tell el Moghreb) were

Medes and Syrians, and Carthaginian colonies occupied the whole of the coast of what is now known as North Africa. Beyond them on the south were the Numidians, yet further away the Getuli, [and after them the Garamantes, whom Sallust refers to as dwelling in a country a very, very long way off.

To sum up : foreign races of ill-defined numbers wandered into the then unknown wilds of North Africa, where the enervating climate paralysed their energies and weakened their constitutions. Here they mingled with the yet older aboriginal people, all trace of whom is now nearly lost. Later, that is to say about the fifth century, whilst the Vandals were ravaging the coast districts, there were yet other incursions from the East (Abyssinia, Upper Egypt and Tyre) of races more modern than the first comers, but still ancient from our point of view, who were the remnants of a world in ruins—of that world we are always trying to build up anew, but never understand.

All these foreigners had more or less to do with the production of the various groups of the so-called Berber race, the inappropriate and indefinite name of which we retain, simply because it has been sanctioned by constant usage. Three of these groups, namely, the people of M'zab, the Ghuâra of the Wâd-Gheir, and the Tuaregs, now occupy portions of the Sahara ; and in the *kusûr*, or fortified

villages, dwell yet other inhabitants who are, as the saying goes, almost Berbers and almost true Saharians.

As for the Arabs, the last to arrive, and the most thoroughly in harmony with the wide stretches of sand over which they wander, it may be roughly stated that they occupy all the districts which the Berbers do not. They intermarry with the latter pretty often, though they look upon such unions



as derogatory to their dignity, in fact, regular *mésalliances*. In spite of these lapses, however, the Arab race remains perfectly distinct, apart, and characteristic, increasing, moreover, rapidly. Haughty, yet miserable, descended from Abraham and from Ishmael, they pride themselves on having given birth to the Prophet, and take a delight in the idleness and apathy distinguishing them from the activity and eager interest in life of the Berbers.

“Deliberation is from God,” says the Koran, “precipitation is from the Devil.”

The modern nomad tribes known as the Shaânbas, whose robberies have rendered them celebrated, with the more important Larbaas, the Aulad-Yaya, with the Said-Otba, Beni-Thor and many others, occupying the districts south of Algeria, are really Arabs dwelling, to quote Sallust once more, in those Saharian "regions consumed by the



terrible heat of the sun; where the heaven is without rain, the earth without springs, where the inhabitants are healthy and robust, inured to fatigue, skilled in the chase," etc.

Really, that chapter of Sallust might have been written yesterday.

From what has just been said, it will be seen that we have to distinguish between two great races

of the Sahara, the differences of which are more accentuated in the feebler than in the stronger sex ; for, as we all know, feminine finery never loses its right to variety even in the desert, and is not as unchangeable as is the burnous of the masculine wearer.

There are then to be considered Arab women and Berber women, with the sub-divisions of each into communities or families.

Berber women are bigger and, when they are beautiful, more beautiful than their Arab sisters ; Arab women are more supple, more graceful, and have a more feline prettiness, when they are pretty, than the Berbers. All alike, however, endure with equal fortitude the rigours of the sultry climate, and all become old before their time. But there is a wild beauty about their childhood like that of the opening bud, and their brief youth is as full of charm as the flower of a day.

CHAPTER II.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF THE ARAB RACE.

TURNING over my travelling note-book, I find the following passage marked with a line in the margin :

“ *El-Aghuat*, Nov. 1898.

“ *The Nomads of the Market*.—Men dressed in white, of every condition of life, are hurrying busily to and fro, crying out, running hither and thither, disputing with each other. Some of them kneeling near their wares, are gesticulating and laughing. Others are lying about here and there, in the hot sunshine or the shade, fast asleep. Outside the hovels, dignified by the name of *cafés*, are merry groups, playing games or chattering, all apparently in the highest spirits. Is the contemplative Arab, seated in front of his tent, absorbed in the idea of the *Maktûb*,* then, after all a myth ?

* That is to say, what is written in the Book of Fate or on the leaves of the Tree of Paradise.—TRANS.

Anyhow, I do not find him here, and all I do recognize of any preconceived notions brought over unconsciously with my luggage, is the magnificence of the gestures of those about me. But these gestures of protestation, recalling the vehement dignity of the Biblical patriarchs, are not those of a chief swearing fidelity or hatred; all the chiefs I have seen are very fat, and scarcely move even their arms. They are merely the gestures of some Weled-Sidi-Atallah, who offers to sell you a lean sheep, or of some beggar who hopes to get *zûg surdi* (a couple of sous) out of you.

“I have been chatting with some experienced travellers from the Southern States, and what they tell me astonishes me greatly. We also questioned some of the people in the tents, nomad Hajâjeh, or Maam'ra, of the great Larbâa tribe, and my illusions were dispelled one after the other. The love of the Arab of the Desert for his horse, for instance?—A mere fiction. He rates his beast according to its marketable value, or according to the use it is to him; but he never caresses it, never speaks to it, any more than he speaks to the rocks of the Shebka. There are, moreover, I am assured, very few horses in the Sahara. And when I reach the south-east, or the south, they will disappear altogether, and the classic vision of a musket pointed from above a flowing mane, behind which regally floats a huge burnous, will become ever rarer and rarer. The musket itself?

The beautiful bronzed weapon of romance is also all but a fiction. The nomad, it is true, never parts from his musket, and carries it slung awkwardly across his shoulders all day long—for all I know to the contrary, all night, too—but he takes very good care not to clean it. He mends it sometimes with



bits of old European meat or biscuit tins. If he should fire it, the weapon would most likely fly to pieces in his hands. But could not his women look after it for him, and rub it up sometimes? His women? The plural is quite out of place in this case, for, with rare exceptions, our nomad only has one wife—at a time, at least, for he often changes her. Polygamy is the luxury of the Caïd,

just as are the beautiful horse and the good musket. Even the Caïds, however, are often content with the two last-named indulgences.

“Only one legitimate wife! Just like some peasant of the Canadian La Beauce or Sainte Marie, or some worthy burgher of Nuremberg. It really seems incredible.

“And how about concubines?

“The nomad has none, never has any, and it is rare for the sedentary Arab to indulge in such luxuries either. One wife is all he has as a rule.”

“*Dakhla*:—The Agha Djellul - ben - el - Hadj - Lakhdar (son of the old chief Bach - Agha, who rules over all the tribes as far as Wargla) expresses to the best of his ability the astonishment aroused in his mind by our ideas about the women of his country. About his own wife, of course, he says never a word, to do so would be a great breach of etiquette. But about those of others the Mussulman code of good manners allows him to speak in a general way; and this is the upshot of what he tells me, another blow to my ideas on the subject of the customs of the nomads.

“Firstly: the Arab woman of the Sahara is comparatively very happy.

“Secondly: she is not shut up.

“Thirdly: she never has to work hard, and she is never ill-treated, still less beaten, except in cases

of unfaithfulness to her husband when she has been taken in the act.

“Fourthly: she has only too much influence over her husband, and he has only too little influence over her. As for her grown-up sons, to quote the actual words of my informant, the mother makes them *marcher kif-kif sous la matraque* and is *sur leur tête et sur leurs yeux*, which probably meant that she has them completely under her thumb.

“Hum! Hum! I coughed politely. The good Agha seemed such a very worthy fellow. But I made up my mind to verify his assertions by every means in my power, for they were so very upsetting, confusing and revolutionary. If I once admitted that what he said was true, what would become of the precise and clear ideas imprinted on my brain by the writings of my predecessors?”

I have quoted these notes verbatim, because they turned out to be absolutely borne out by facts, and are a revelation of the states of mind I had to pass through. I had arrived in the Sahara full of good intentions, meaning to observe accurately, and well stocked with information! I thought I knew something about the geography, the history, the religion, and the social organization of the people. I had tried to learn a little of the languages, I had studied old books in Arabic, Latin, and Greek. I had even inspected certain celebrated

papyri, such as those in the Rainer collection at Vienna. But, in spite of all that, I knew absolutely nothing of the LIFE of the desolate country which I felt it was to be my fate some day to love—nothing, nothing whatever; and, unfortunately, many of those who have lived in it know no more than I did.

Now, however, brought into direct touch with



reality, my opinions, hitherto influenced by Romanesque tradition, were altogether upset. It was all the better, too, for the poetry of convention is never equal to that of actual facts, when looked at face to face in the full, true light of day.

I now went, every morning and every afternoon, into the streets and alleys to hunt out curious types. I met women packed up in their veils, followed them, and when they went into their low houses

with the tortuous entrance passages, I went in after them without invitation. A pause would then ensue, during which they gazed at me with unveiled faces, either hostilely or with looks of surprise, and I noted everything about them, including the wretched holes, dark and bare, dignified by the name of rooms, opening from the narrow court. All the looms for weaving as well as the cooking utensils are kept outside; and at the end of a kind of den, from which all air is excluded, are the piles of worn stones constituting the hearth, from which issues an acrid reddish smoke. Everything is shewn to me, and even explained, but at the same time there remains a wall of defiance between the women and myself, a wall I found it indeed difficult to break through. The farther I went, whether in the gardens of the oasis or towards the rocks at the foot of the fort, where the nomads pitch their camps, and the tent more and more constantly replaced the *gurbi* or house, the greater did this reserve seem to grow, till it almost deepened into hostility.

My aim was not yet attained. It is true I could see the stuffs in which the women draped themselves, such as the variegated *maliffa* rolled about the body, kept in place on the shoulders by two long silver pins called *richetts*; the white *ougaya* which falls from the headdress, fastened above the breasts with a carved *m'zima*; and the red, green, or blue silk *maharma* draped about their hair; the

bracelets on their slender arms and the *khalkhats* on their thin ankles. But their souls were absolutely closed to me. I could not read their very simplest thoughts or understand their most ordinary actions.

Rather discouraged by the ill-success of my efforts, I made up for their failure by interesting myself in the various occupations of the men, who work at their forges, and do their polishing, carving, embroidering, and sewing in public. I made a great many delightful acquaintances amongst the makers of Turkish slippers, wool carders, leather cutters, etc., and I became quite at home amongst the date merchants and sellers of beans and onions. I had long conversations with the big-wigs, or, as they are locally called, the big *cabousses* of the neighbourhood, who used to stroll about in the sunshine in all the majesty of their *haïks* or long cloaks. And through this quite a new feminine world opened out before me.

In Europe it is through the women that one gets to understand the men a little, and to gain some idea of the working of their minds, with the motives of their actions ; the mother, the wife, the mistress are the chief sources of information. In Southern Algeria, or the Sahara, it was, thanks to the Arab and Berber men, that I got to know anything about the women. It was the masculine good-will which

won for me the admission to the home life or *heurm* (the harem as we call it), and secured for me a welcome there. This became more and more the case the farther I went from civilized districts, but at the very beginning of my travels it was evident enough that the men must be first conciliated. In the eyes of the notables and of the merchants I was a *taleba*, or a *femme savante*, a sort of hybrid between a doctor and a public writer; one who could concoct grievances or grant favours; in fact, an influential deputy, able to secure showers of decorations and appointments. The benevolent protection accorded to me by the military authorities gave support to these ideas. Hence the desire of many to oblige me, and of the more disinterested hopes of others that they should see me set right the mistakes of my predecessors amongst the *rûmis*,* as they call all foreigners. Many poured out their own pet theories to me, but at the same time they gave me a chance to verify them. "You will see things as they really are," they would say, "you will recognize how much better they are here than in France."

To use the popular and very expressive saying, I was free to take it or leave it, and I probably did get a lot of information from these men with hobbies that I could never have gained alone. And if the receptions which ensued, and at which the

* The original meaning of the word *Rûmi* is Roman.—TRANS.

women evidently had orders to be amiable at any cost, seemed to me unnatural, forced, and artificial, I was generally able by going to the same home again and again to get into something like *rapport* with my hostesses. The confidence of a woman of the Sahara really begins exactly when she leaves off trying to please you and treats you as an unimportant person. She is then perfectly un-



ceremonious and goes on with her usual occupations, or she chatters with her friends, your presence affecting her no more than that of a piece of furniture, until she suddenly remembers you and worries you with offers of *caouah*, or coffee, chokes you with sweets, inundates you with rancid perfumes, and overwhelms you with caresses, exclaiming: "You are my friend, you are my sister; my house and all that it contains are yours, and so is

the life of my children, or my own life if you want it." And she gazes at you with her great deep eyes, and you feel as if you were watching a soul awakening from a sleep of long-past centuries. The soft orbs seem to be literally melting with passionate affection, a violent intermittent tenderness, lasting a few minutes only, but almost sincere at the moment of expression. At last, however, it is over ; the fire goes out, the coffee gets cold, friendship folds her wings once more, and all this love changes at need into hatred, or sullen hostility, the unconscious reaction of over-strained nerves after great excitement.

CHAPTER III.

BEAUTY AMONGST THE ARABS.

ONE day chance led me to a corner of an oasis occupied by the Aulâd-Ziane nomads. The crumbling walls of their huts of dried mud rose along a grey lane of the colour of the desert, and the low doors of their homes admitted only the initiated, that is to say, the husband and a negro gardener; for amongst the Arabs, a negro is looked upon as of no account—he is just a slave, a kind of domestic servant.

The nomads of the desert often have within what is called their *kasr*, or fortified village, a magazine or a garden, sometimes both; the former serving as a shelter for the grain stored up for food or barter, whilst the latter is the camping ground, and the dates grown on the trees in it are carried away with them when the wanderers move on, either for their own consumption or to be sold.

When I knocked at the low door of one of the little huts of the Aulâd-Ziane settlement I had not

yet obtained all the diplomatic privileges I described just now, so that the man who appeared in answer to my summons greeted me with no titles of honour, nor did he take me for a doctor. To him, too, however, I was a Rûmiya, or a foreigner, a traveller who had been saluted by the spahis of



the Arab authorities! It was easy to see from the way in which he turned the clumsy wooden key, several inches long, in the primitive lock of his door, that he felt a certain deference for me, mingled with annoyance at my appearance. For these Saharian husbands are always jealous of any intrusion into their homes; they are afraid of imprudent actions being suggested to their wives,

or of ideas about the emancipation of women being put into their heads.

So he said to me laconically, as he stretched his arm out towards a group invisible to me :

“The women are down there.”

But where might “down there” be?

I saw some square patches of garden, planted alternately with carrots and green barley, from which rose the hot perfume of tropical vegetation, with here and there groups of white fig-trees now shedding their autumn leaves; the whole scene bathed in the tender charm of the evening light. And behind the rigid rows of the stiff and symmetrical palm trees—all too stiff and symmetrical for beauty—the broiling sun was blazing, before it should suddenly disappear, as it always does, in this land where twilight is unknown. Divine hour, not exactly of peace, but of calm and sadness; instinct with the impression of nothingness which succeeds the brilliant tragedy of the day.

“The women are down there,” repeated the man who had opened the door, and he now led the way to them. My guide was the style of man admired by the fair in the glorious days of what they themselves call the *fantasiya*, one of those who surround themselves perpetually with a cloud of white smoke, like the aureole of noble victors in a fight. Suddenly, however, he effaced himself, and I came in sight of the women behind an old

and leafless pomegranate tree. Poor women they were, belonging to a poor family and wearing shabby clothes. One of them, the wife, was young and, though slim and much sunburnt from living in the desert, was really quite pretty ; the other—the mother, not of the wife but of the husband—was



a regular wreck, wrinkled and ugly, perfectly dried-up, so to speak. They had left their woollen tent, which was pitched close by, for a wretched little hovel made of bricks of dried earth, about three feet wide by nine feet long, with no door that would shut ; but the possession of which gave them the proud consciousness, or rather illusion, of living in a house like the sedentary tribes.

“ *M’sell Kher Alikoum !* ” said I, but they took no notice of my greeting, which I stammered out in their refractory language. They remained silent, apparently stupefied, and it was not until the man said something to them that they managed to reply :

“ *M’sell Kher !* ”

The old woman was plying a distaff, whilst the young one was rocking a cradle, a little *bassur* as she herself would have called it, made of interlaced branches ; a nest without any bottom or sides, or comforts of any kind, just a support in fact, hung from the low roof on a rope of twisted grass. On this, completely hidden beneath a folded carpet, slept the baby. There was absolutely nothing else in this “ town house ” but this ærial bed, the saucepan for the *merga*, and two wretched old rugs or *fréchias* to be used as coverings during the night, now fast approaching.

I could not draw out these women in any other way than by going through the everlasting dialogue with which every conversation begins here.

“ How are you ? ”

“ Quite well. And you ? ”

“ Quite well.”

“ And your family ? ”

“ Quite well.”

“ And all those belonging to you ? ”

“ Quite well.”

"What is your name?"

"Mesauda."

"How old are you?"

"I do not know. Allah knows."

"How many children have you?"

"One, there it is."

"Is it a boy?"

"Yes."

"What is his name?"

"The name of his fathers."

"How old is he?"

"Allah knows."

As the reader will perceive, there is not much to be found out by this kind of conversation, and I must add that any attempt to photograph any of the women here was hopeless. They begin to howl and veil their faces directly they suspect anything of the kind, and nothing but stratagem is ever any good.

However, I don't think I had ever yet been so much impressed by a visit as I was on this occasion. I don't quite understand how it was, unless it was the harmony of the scene and the time of day, or perhaps the cosiness of the very small family in such a very small compass.

Somehow, during the visits I paid the next day, the scene kept recurring to me, as it were, in spite of myself, and I saw again the shut-in garden, from which arose the perfume of vegetation, steeping

in its somewhat acrid emanations, tent and house alike of my nomad friends. Poor they were, but not miserable ; simple but not savage ; primitive, no doubt, but with all the sensitiveness and reserve characteristic of the highest civilization.



Were they at all in sympathy with me ? No, not in the least. Widely separated races never can be in sympathy with each other in any true sense of the word. And for this particular race which cringes, steals, sulks and shuffles, cheating and deceiving us on every possible opportunity, we feel a latent contempt, such as conquerors feel for the conquered.

Why then should this group have constantly recurred to my memory? The man with his dignified gestures, the child invisible in his little cradle, the venerable, Sybil-like old woman, almost sculpturesque in her immobility, and the beautiful young wife, tall and straight, refined and delicate, turning towards me with her finely-chiselled lips half parted by a smile, and her dark eyes limpid with an unfathomable expression.

I know now why I cannot get them out of my mind. It is because they represent to me my idea of the Beautiful.

Beauty, that many-sided and most fickle Sphinx, had so far not occupied my thoughts much on this journey, for too many novelties had enchained my attention. For all that, Beauty emanates from everything which lives, which breathes, or sighs. But we call this beauty quaintness when it clashes with our preconceived notions, ugliness when it shocks our prejudices, and we only give it its true name when it harmonizes with the ideal in our own minds, or the yet more hackneyed one with which our brains have been saturated by our education, our complicated civilization, our art and our respect for what other people think.

Beauty to us is that which appeals to our instincts and our prejudices. It is alike the incense which enervates us, the pungent flavour which arouses us. There are then as many kinds of beauty as there

are races, and, moreover, in every race as many kinds again as there are individuals. Peter's judgment is not the same as Paul's, nor is Paul's the same as Peter's. Everyone has different tendencies and feelings both with regard to details and to things as a whole. How can everyone then be made to agree? How can all these different opinions be brought into harmony? A gigantic task and no mistake! So I shall just content myself with saying that a colour, or a melody, or some charming attitude is beautiful, that is to say, it appears beautiful to me as a Rûmiya, or to an Arab, as the case may be. And I can only hope the reader will not cavil at my conclusions, either because they are too entirely or not sufficiently my own; I will endeavour at least that they shall be sincere.

And yet, perhaps, there are certain scenes, certain lights, certain eyes, which so nearly approach the sublime that every human creature who gazes on them cannot fail to admire them, or realize that he is wrong if he cannot do so. I think this was the case on that autumn evening, with the deep, pathetic yearning eyes of my young nomad woman, the golden beams of the setting sun as it kissed the sand, the boundless infinity of the background beyond the white and leafless fig-trees and the too rigid and monotonous branches of the great Saharian palms.

But, after all, can we honestly say that the Arab women of the Southern Sahara, not to speak as yet of the Berbers, are¹ beautiful from the European point of view, which I suppose is primarily that of the Greeks and Romans, and secondarily that of Sir Edward Burne-Jones?

Yes, and no.

In every *kasr* or fortified village, in every tribe, in every *dawar** or group of tents, there are certain very pretty women, but they are quite the exception, and those who are considered ugly certainly fully merit the expression.

As for those who hit the happy medium between these two extremes, they may be looked upon as typical; they are better looking than their sisters in the country and in the small towns of France, if we compare those of fifteen years old with French girls of from eighteen to twenty.

Now what are the physical defects of these typical women? Scarcity of hair for one thing, which they make up for by naïve imitations concocted out of the long hairs of camels' tails, or

* The *dawar* consists of a group of tents, which are removed at the same time under the direction of a *Kébir* or ancient. A collection of *dawars* of the same origin forms the tribe, commanded by a *Caïd*. The tribes in their turn are grouped under an *Agha*, and great confederations such as that of the Larbâa under a *Bach-Agha*. In some cases the place of Agha or chief of several tribes is taken by a *Caïd of Caïds*. These groups and titles are in use in the Southern Sahara only, they are slightly different in Northern Algeria.

of coarse dyed wool. A plentiful crop of hair is rare, and is much coveted, so everyone tries to seem to have immense quantities framing the whole face, and strong enough to bear the weight of heavy rings.

Another fault in the faces of the Arab women is that their jaws are too heavy, and the lower one is too prominent, but this imperfection, so marked amongst the tribes of the Northern Sahara and of the mountains beyond, notably the Aulâd-Nâil, is much less marked in the people of the Southern districts, and the Shaânba women are not affected by it. However, the Arabs themselves think quite differently from us on the subject; they like the aggressive chin, probably for what it suggests to them, and for this reason they consider a Ouled-Nâil beauty more attractive than a Shaânbiya. Very seldom indeed did a native point out "a very beautiful woman" to me, who was not in my eyes afflicted with the disfiguring jaw.

Another less repulsive defect is that the hips and the legs are often too thin, but the busts are always full and finely moulded, a distinctive beauty of the Arab race, contrasting greatly with the shrunken breasts of the women of the Coast districts and those of the Turkish harems. Here the young women have bosoms as beautiful as those of Greek torsi of the third period; their arms are exquisitely formed, their necks finely curved,

and they pose naturally in the most graceful and dignified attitudes. Even when their rare fits of anger break their ordinary calm, they are still charming. When lying at full length on the damp slabs of the vapour bath she delights in, an Arab



woman of the Southern districts looks like a statue of fawn-coloured marble, chaste yet strangely self-willed, a sort of triple hermaphrodite, if I may coin such a name, for the upper part of her body is that of a true woman in her freshest bloom, whilst the torso resembles that of a European girl of thirteen,

and the thighs, the knees, legs, and feet, those of a youth, such as the well-known Greek boy extracting a thorn from his foot.

Her feet are pretty enough, however, prettier than her hands. Her face is long, and her cheeks are rather flat. Her forehead, tattooed with a little design in blue, is broad and smooth, her nose is finely modelled and her lips are mobile, but her eyes make you forget all her other features, so fascinatingly soft are they, so seductive in their expression, their brightness enhanced by the use of *kohl*. Such eyes would redeem faces with no other charm, and they make up for the excessive use of vermilion, henna, and saffron, the piles of clothing and stuffs with which the figure is disguised, and the various odours emitted from them, in which musk and what they call *krounfell* predominate.

The freer the race is from Berber taint the browner is the complexion, and the brown varies in depth of colour according to worldly position; the wealthy, and therefore idle, families of the sedentary tribes having clear skins of a brownish ivory colour, whilst the poor nomads, who are exposed to the heat of the sun and the sultry wind of the desert, are very much tanned. The pink and white complexions, which are of pretty frequent occurrence amongst the Arabs, betray the admixture of another strain of blood of some

avowed or clandestine union of ancestors. The true unmixed Arab race is still that of Arabia, and of those fair dwellers in the Gardens of the Blest who, according to Mohammed, are to reward the just who on this earth keep to the paths of righteousness.

"The faithful," says the prophet, "shall have given to them virgins with large black eyes, whose complexions will be of the colour of the carefully hidden eggs of the ostrich." (Koran: Sûrah xxxvii. 47.) "They shall have beauties who will gaze at them tenderly with eyes of the colour of the pearls in a necklace." (Koran: Sûrah lxi. 22.)

And in the Song of Songs, in which Solomon lovingly describes the charms of the Shulamite, the picture is completed of a type still to be met with here and there shrouded beneath the veils which no male *Rûmis*, as the Arabs call all foreigners, has the right to lift.

"Thy teeth," says Solomon in this wonderful love-song, "are like a flock of sheep that are even shorn, which come up from the washing . . . thy lips are like a thread of scarlet and thy speech is comely; thy temples are like a piece of a pomegranate within thy locks . . . Thy two breasts are like two young roes that are twins which feed among the lilies . . . Thy lips drop as the honey-comb; honey and milk are under thy tongue and the smell of thy garments is like the smell of Lebanon."

A rhapsody forming, indeed, a fitting reply to the impassioned appeal of the beloved one to the lover, in which she exclaims: "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth: for thy love is better than wine; because of the savour of thy good ointments thy name is as an ointment poured forth, therefore do the virgins love thee."



Alas! the seductive charm of the Arab woman fades all too soon. The beautiful, graceful, but half-washed little Arab girl is like the buds of a magnolia soiled by the dust of the streets. Time slips quickly past, coquetry awakens, the sap flows quickly in the veins, and then comes the opening flower, quickly burnt up by the sun, so that it is faded almost before it has really lived.

I have seen two or three well-preserved women who were still beautiful at thirty, but they were quite the exception, and in generalizing the exceptions must be ignored. Poor, poor withered flowers ! The only consolation they have for their early decay is, amongst the great ladies of the big tents, to hide its ravages by paint, and, amongst their poorer sisters, to meet their lot with resignation. But what is to make up to us foreigners for all the wrinkled faces and prematurely decrepit figures we see in the desert ? This : the beauty of that desert is not all concentrated in its women ; and the woman of the desert, to be in harmony with the spirit of its wide solitudes, has need of nothing but her own natural gestures, quite apart from what is strictly called beauty.

CHAPTER IV.

A DIFFICULT CHAPTER.

I HAVE now to write the most difficult chapter of my book, which may possibly get me into disgrace with certain husbands in Southern Algeria and the Sahara.

For the fact is, even those who do not read a word of our language know everything which is written about them or their wives or their country. It is, alas! quite impossible for an author to hide his or her light under a bushel! Everything is known in the land of sun and sand—everything, absolutely everything—which is said or written or even hinted about the Southern districts, or the Desert. News, however trifling or insignificant, is spread abroad in mysterious ways, added to, transformed, and hushed up according to fancy. It travels from *kasr* to *dawar*, from *dawar* to caravan, to the great sand hills of Ergesh on the west, to Aïr or Asben in the south, to In-Salah in the oases of Tuât, to Timbuktu, to the Egyptian Sûdan, and comes back again, sometimes by sea and sometimes

by land, to make, what may perhaps be aptly called a second walking newspaper tour ; only by this time the original items of intelligence are so exaggerated and so disfigured, that the mediums of their transmission do not recognize them.

Unfortunately, however, the second incognito tour takes place before the first. Moreover, my earnest desire to hurt nobody's feelings, above all not to wound those who have welcomed and helped me, is very hampering. I hesitate. Shall I or shall I not express my opinion ? In the end I reply to my own question : " Truth is one and indivisible, to hold my peace would be treason to her."

I feel bound, in fact, if I am to give any true picture of the life of the Saharian women, to touch on the delicate question of their code of morals. People know only too well what that of the men is, whether they be Arabs or Berbers. But how about the women ?—I mean the wives or future wives, ignoring those who omit the ceremony of marriage altogether.

Now, it seems to me, though it is a hard thing to say, that the women have no code of morals properly so called, for they are more like the gazelles and the cats to which I likened them above, than to responsible human beings. No one would talk of the morals of a pet gazelle or cat, shut up from all possible communion with its fellow-

creatures, and that is really what the Arab and Berber women are supposed to be by the men to whom they belong. They cannot get out, so where is the merit of their stopping in? But it so happens that, in spite of all the locks and keys, they do get out sometimes, purely, be it explained, for the fun of the thing, rather than for any evil purpose. And, alas that it should be said! there is always some evil-minded go-between, generally an old woman, ready to turn indiscretion into real mischief. The husband makes fast the outer door with heavy bolts and strews sand outside it, that any trespassing footprints may remain as witness against intruders, but it is quite easy to get out by the terrace at the back, which is connected with the low wall above the narrow street. The go-between gets admission on some pretext, such as having fresh sweetmeats to sell, or she comes to beg alms, and when the master is safely away at the Moorish café, listening to the local gossip, or amusing himself in a less innocent way, the whole thing is easily enough arranged. The next morning, the master of the house will examine the sand on the threshold, and say to himself: "There is old Bielle the negro's footprint, and that was left by the nurse, and there is my own, but, Allah be praised, little Zorah's is not there!" Poor deluded fellow! his little Zorah jumped down like a cat from the wall at the back into the street as soon as her gaoler's

back was turled, and you saw nothing, heard nothing, knew nothing, or if you had any suspicions you kept them to yourself, for fear of ridicule or from an unacknowledged dread of some malignant *jinn* or evil spirit having been at work.

In the dawar of the nomad tribes intrigues are alike more easily arranged and more romantic than in the towns. They are carried on between



children of the same soil and of the same race, and there is about them something of the fierce passion characteristic of primitive manners. When the shades of night are just beginning to yield to the sweet influences of the tremulous dawn, at that witching moment when a glamour is thrown over everything, a corner of the tent is stealthily raised, and the lover, with bated breath and hushed footsteps, glides into the very arms of the adored one.

But beware, ye foolish ones ! Be not too sure that the jealous husband is not on the watch ; for if he is he may kill you both, or if he does not go so far as that he will certainly accuse him who has "robbed his tent" before the Cadi, and try to salve the wounds to his honour by extorting a good many dollars from the offender, so that the hour



which began with kisses may very possibly end in tears.

This kind of thing goes on in the town, the kasr, or beneath the burning open sky, with a simplicity, a *naïveté*, which is almost innocent, it is so utterly natural and unsophisticated. The fact is, it is not fair to judge these children of the desert by our own European standard, they are of a type so utterly different to any with which we are familiar. The

sensuality is physical only, it does not affect the soul in the least. Highly nervous, impulsive and passionate, with but little intellect, the women of the Sahara are not depraved and their lapses from the straight path do not leave any real stain upon them. Old women quite forget the slips of their youth; they were to them so natural, so entirely a matter of course, that they do not see any inconsistency in preaching to young girls on the subject of modesty, and over their own past a kind of delicate veil is thrown, which takes the place of the chastity on which they never set any real value.

Of course, I did not find all this out at first. The remarks I have just made are the result of long study on the spot, and I need not dwell more on a painful subject, only I want my readers to bear what I have said in mind and to remember the significant native proverb :

“Virtue will flourish amongst us when salt germinates and coal puts forth sprouts.”



THE BIG ARAB CAFÉ AT EL AGHUAT.

CHAPTER V.

MORE ABOUT EL-AGHUAT.

WHILST I was still at El-Aghuat I began to be troubled with conscientious scruples, lest I should be seeing things too much from the European point of view, or note only such manners and customs as have been modified by French influence. I therefore determined to carry out my original project : to go forth across the limitless plains and seek for sure information beneath the vast dome of heaven and in the distant tent of the wandering Arab.

Now back again, after many wanderings and many a halt, I do homage to El-Aghuat as an admirable centre of exact information for those who know how to get at it. It is indeed the Paris of the Sahara, the Capital dreamt of and longed for by the *sokhrar*, or camel driver, as he plods along beside his clumsy-looking animals in their slow and leisurely progress across the sands. As the *sokhrars* keep vigil beneath the stars, they talk together in enthusiastic terms of the beautiful dancers and the brilliant cafés of El-Aghuat, where on the earthen floor in the low

narrow rooms the luxury of a mat can be obtained, and the primitive earthenware stove is adorned by a magnificent coffee-pot which cost no less than thirty-five sous. Yes, it is just that, the life of the people is concentrated in the capital, and, however modified by distance, that capital is held in loving memory by them wherever they may be.

I remember many exciting adventures I had in my wanderings whilst I was at El-Aghuat. The mornings were delightful, and I had to make the most of them, for the broiling heat of noon came all too quickly. How golden was the light, how pearl-like the sky, in those fair early hours when the spices in the market seemed redder, gleaming like splashes of blood; when even the poor weary camels, resting near their discharged loads of *tellis*, or strong striped bags made of the fibres of *alfa*, looked poetic, the sunshine touching their coarse hair with glory and bathing them and the wretched objects about them in a kind of peaceful joy, of which they themselves were probably quite unconscious.

The markets in the Sahara are not in the least like those held in France, or even like the gay, many-coloured displays of Spain, and of countries under Turkish domination. If it were not for a few emerald-coloured children's *robas*, as they call frocks, the green note so effective in markets would be altogether wanting. The market consists chiefly

of a few radishes and onions, wretched-looking vegetables, wrung as it were from the dry soil, with here and there equally wretched little bunches of corn or of barley. I saw three bits of dry wood, about which quite an eager crowd of speculators had gathered, and a yet more keen competition was going on round a donkey and two sheep. The fate of a whole family—babies in arms and little toddlers, old grandmothers and camels—hung upon the result, the sum at issue being quite an insignificant one. Only the young women were absent, for they never appear in public here. Even those who go about freely in the dawar, where the custom of the veil has not yet been introduced, would not dare to show themselves in the town.

Even after all the bargaining the decision of the buyer must be patiently waited for, and there is always a long break between the tumult and excitement of the morning and what may be called the *Petite Bourse* of the evening. Nothing to do all the weary hours but to wait, wait, wait, drinking a few cups of *caouah*, or coffee, and invoking the Holy Prophet—May Allah preserve him. Amen!

All along the ramparts of the north similar scenes, slightly varied according to locality, are to be witnessed. A lover of paradox might indeed assert, without much exaggeration, that the nomad of the desert can be better studied in the market of El-Aghuat than in his own dawar, at all events

unless a long stay can be made in that dawar. For when he is "at home," the man of the desert is either asleep, away at the chase, or taking his animals out in search of pasture. The old woman meanwhile, when "at home," is busy over the various avocations which appear to us so puerile. Whereas in the market, camped upon the hot ground, beneath the shadow of the walls or under



the swaying branches of the lofty palm trees, the simple-hearted folk are seen to very much greater advantage. Intense curiosity, which, however, they dissemble as much as possible, rouses them, for a time at least, out of their mental apathy and sets free their souls. There they rest in idleness, divine idleness, as sweet as honey—*el kessel kif l'assel*—from their dreary marches and arduous toil.

But now the time changes, so does the scene and its setting, and all along the southern ramparts I wander unweariedly beneath the rays of the setting sun. Here there is water, precious water from the subterranean wâdy. There are women prattling and children laughing together. One washing-place succeeds another, long narrow basins level with the soil, frequented by washerwomen in bright garments picturesquely tucked up, who beat, soap and wring out the red *maliffas* or the blue veils, gaily dipping in the running water their *khalkhals*, or heavy flat or rounded silver anklets and their golden bracelets, of both of which they often wear a great number.

This was my first and I may also say my chief school in what I shall call agricultural familiarity. For although in theory young women do not go to the washing-places any more than they do to other public places, it is only the newly-married wives, who have kept house but for a few months, or at the most a few years, who really keep away. There may be seen timid-looking young girls, big girls of marriageable age, such as are generally shut up at home, women still fresh and attractive, who are met with nowhere else except on the great occasion of a wedding. Very charming it all is, too, as they greet each other, chat together, joke and tease each other in their clear ringing voices: "Ya Fatma!" "Ya Mabruka!" they cry,

pushing each other about good-humouredly and splashing each other in fun. A pin falls out, a neckerchief slips down, a tress of hair is uncovered ; but if a man happens to pass, especially a *Rûmi*, the veils are all quickly closed, the twittering in the aviary stops all at once. What a pity ! but never mind, just wait a minute ; when the intruder is out of sight the warbling will begin again, and will be all the more eager to make up for the tiresome interruption. These chattering birds have claws and sharp beaks.

I approach in my turn.

“ May thy day be a happy one, oh *Rûmîya* ! ”

“ May all blessing be upon thee.”

“ How art thou ? ”

“ Well.”

“ And thy family ? ”

“ Well.”

“ And all belonging to thee ? ”

“ Well.”

And so on.

This is how the Arab women always address me. I am to them the *Rûmîya*, or foreign lady, who interests them so much and whom they adore, or at least protest to me that they do.

I press their wet hands and help an old lady to readjust upon her bald head a big turban which has got out of place, through its owner's too vigorous gestures.

“May Allah reward thee, oh Rûmîya! May He increase thy wealth!”

And so on, *patiti, patita!*

As I said before, they are like twittering birds. Of course they belong to quite the lower classes; a grand lady would never demean herself by going



to the washing-basins with their floating masses of frothy soap-suds.

“Tell me, oh Rûmîya! Do they wash linen in thy country?” asks one of the women, who evidently has her doubts on the subject of French cleanliness. Exclamations and questions are now poured out, and my usual companion, little Milûd-ben-Ch’tiûi, whose name will often recur in these pages, is overwhelmed with enquiries.

“Oh, Milûd, can thy mistress, the Rûmîya, spin wool?”

“Oh, Milûd, why does she wear no jewels?”

This not wearing ornaments astonishes them more than anything. They have quite made up their minds that I am rich, for I travel about without being obliged, and some one saw a five-franc piece in my purse the other day, so rich I undoubtedly am. But to be rich and sport neither bracelets, finger nor ear-rings, when they—though they are only women of the people—never take theirs off, is altogether beyond their comprehension.

“My jewels, thou must understand, are a part of me!” they declare, adding: “We do not take our ornaments off, because we must enjoy them now, in this passing hour, for they will be nothing to us when we are dead.”

“I have seen thee before, oh Rûmiya,” says one, “I saw thee at the house of this one or that.”

“Perhaps thou didst. If thou wilt, I will go to thy house to-morrow.”

But I get no answer to this insinuating suggestion. They all hope I shall come near enough to them for them to touch my clothes, but they are frightened at the idea of my actually going to see them. I shall go, however, but not just yet awhile, so as not to alarm them too much. Then I begin to talk about something else, and watch them beating the linen with the big club of palm-wood they use for the purpose.



A NEGRESS WASHERWOMAN.

“Fare thee well, oh Rûmiya!’ they all say as I turn away, but before I left the young girls had all disappeared, because they had seen some soldiers strolling towards the gate of the town; and now there were only the poor old grandmothers with their dyed hair, and the little children with their solemn faces, who were pummelling each other with their fists as they squatted in the huge *gueças*, as the big dishes are called, made of a single piece of wood cut horizontally from some tree of great diameter, which are used for making the *rissoles* of meat and flour called *kouskous* by the Arabs, as well as for carrying the washing, the domestic utensils being of the simplest, consisting merely in fact of a bowl such as this, a sieve for straining the alfa, and one saucepan. I must not forget to add that besides the Arab women there were a good many negresses at the washing-place, some hired from the country, others the wives of gardeners, or the servants of the well-to-do, many of them formerly slaves, accidentally liberated for one reason or another.

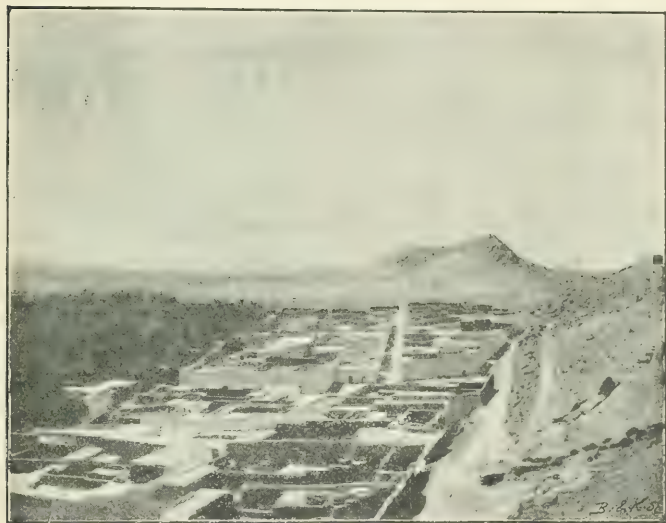
I tore myself away at last and went further on to similar washing-places, where I found everything as bright and the women as playful and kitten-like as they had been in the scene I had just quitted. The limpid water, the ornaments of silver or of gold, the bead necklaces, the dark eyes and the white teeth; all alike shone, gleamed, and sparkled

in the hot oblique evening rays, whilst the colours of the robes in which the supple figures of the daughters of the Desert were draped, and of the garments spread out to dry on the burning sand, deep violet or vivid green and yellow, simply vibrated in the vivid light.

Shall I be accused of preferring the women of the people? Well, perhaps I do, for how can I describe my ceremonious intercourse with the wives of dignitaries, of native aristocrats of long descent, portly townswomen who have adopted the customs of the North and the fashions of Algiers? I was well enough received, it is true, but the courtesy for which I am indebted to them was not exactly that of the Sahara. Their all too transparent pretty speeches, their very artificial manners and the ornaments of their reception rooms, such as gorgeous clocks on rickety *marquet rie* stands, are all alike constant reminders to me that the true Desert expires at the gates of Algiers. It is elsewhere—far, far away from it—that I must go to look for those I seek: the natural, simple, unaffected, I may almost say wild, daughters of the Sahara, such as was, probably, Hagar, the mother of Ishmael.

Yes; elsewhere, far, far away, in the desert solitudes, or I may perhaps meet with some of them in the wretched Ch'tett suburb, from which one can see the straight line of the horizon, where

earth and heaven meet. Here the children of the town, mixed with those of the nomads, whose tents are pitched in the Desert hard by, play with their favourite knuckle-bones or pan pipes. Here, about five o'clock, old men with palsied limbs, and blind men of rigid aspect led by some little



grandchild, come to pray, whilst in the narrow picturesque alleys the women come and go, gliding furtively from door to door. At sight of me they flee away as if terrified, but very soon they reappear armed with their distaffs, each surmounted by a bunch of feathers. They surround me and begin to ply me with inquisitive questions, and with their

endless set greetings, "May all happiness attend thee," etc., etc. They tease each other, gesticulate, frolic together, run and dance about with mincing steps and fawn upon me all at the same time. Very typical is it all of the Orient, but the African Orient, the Orient of Arabia and Judæa, with its tinsel frippery no doubt, but without the lassitude and languor generally associated with the Orient.

In the quaint old hilly quarter of the town, for instance, I one day saw a young girl of about thirteen or fourteen coming down a tortuous street, carrying a bowl of steaming soup, her slender fingers, with the nails stained with henna, almost meeting as she clasped the rough earthenware, and carefully threaded her way along on her bare feet, the fringed eyelids drooping over the soft dark eyes, as she looked down lest she should trip on some obstacle in her path. Her dress was of some purple hue, the deep purple of the after-glow when the sun has set. A thin white wrap called an *ougaya* floated about her delicate face and shoulders. Where was she going? On some errand of mercy, or to some humble meal? I cannot tell why, but somehow the former idea took complete hold of my fancy. And I was right, for a woman standing near me certainly pronounced the word *sadaya*, which means almsgiving. As the child disappeared, her veil made me think, in spite of the sacrilege of

the idea, of that worn by Mary, or, as the Arabs call her, Miriam, the mother of Jesus.

The little maid had indeed the gentle, modest bearing, the child-like grace, of some Virgin on her way to the Temple to offer at the altar her vessel of burning oil.

A dove with soiled plumage, it is true, my little sister of mercy, but a dove for all that.



In every house I enter the women gather about me to examine me as closely as possible. My clothes interest them very much. They greatly covet a Cheviot tweed skirt I wear, of quite cheap material, which they consider "very fine stuff," and they express great surprise when I declare that I admire their loose, floating garments. Then all of a sudden they seemed quite indignant because I suggested that one of them should put my hat on

her head for a minute. It would be a sin, a horrible sin, to cover the skull of a true believer with the *baretta* of an infidel!

“May Allah preserve us from such a thing! Our house is thine, oh Rûmiya, but thy *baretta* might lose us our place in Paradise, and that of our children and our children’s children.”

Directly I appear in a house there is a bustle to prepare coffee for me. It is only people of note who have to take it, such people as the Rûmiya, the mother of the family, and the most important neighbours, for instance. Young girls do not drink it and children are too young they say. But I, unfortunate victim of convention, have to absorb an incalculable number of cups a day; one cup where I am a stranger, two or three when I visit my “friends.” Besides this, I must eat many cakes, and some of what they call *kessra*, a kind of bread, eaten hot, made without leaven and baked in the ashes, in very general use in these parts, to all which are added preparations of fruit and dates. “Eat, eat,” they all say; “our house is thine!”

Our conversations are often somewhat noisy. Each one has a story to relate, and the stories are long and dreary. Then they tell me all about the weddings which are to come off; I hear all the virtues of the father, or of the bridegroom. I am expected to listen to accounts of the children of each of the women present; how many she has,

whether they are girls or boys, how old they are, all about their birth, the anxiety their ailments have caused, every remark from me leading to interruption and additional information from the others. But the curiosity I myself inspire swallows up my own, so to speak, for every enquiry I make is answered by a question.

“Why do you travel?” An enquiry repeated under a thousand forms.

“Tell us, oh Rûmîya, when thou returnest to thy beloved Paris, wilt thou spend all thy time playing cards?”

“Wilt thou eat a lot of cakes?”

“Wilt thou put on thy jewels, which thou hast not worn on thy journey?”

Always this question of jewels, which pursued me to Ghardaya, to Wargla, and to the most remote limits of my exploring expedition. The women have at last found the reason for my eccentricity: I do not wear my jewels because I am afraid of losing them. As for getting them to believe that I have none, or that if I have they are not like theirs, I give it up. And in the end I say “yes” to everything. “Yes, when I am back in Paris I shall play cards all day long, I shall eat quantities of cakes, I shall put on my jewels and my gold coins.” Now at last they are satisfied, and I have imprinted yet another error on their brains just to purchase a little peace for myself!

When I go unexpectedly into the quieter quarter of the *seguias*, my entrance does not cause quite such a commotion. Generally speaking I find the young women occupied in getting ready the evening meal, weaving carpets or spinning wool, etc., whilst their elders are busy preparing the woof, or are fetching



wood for the fire. Then if I am already known to my hostess a confidential chat begins, and I watch the women at their work, which is interesting without being arduous, admiring their graceful, almost voluptuous attitudes. They are only rapid in their movements when they run from one room to another—I have already described what wretched places these rooms are—or when they hurry down the steps without railings leading from the terrace to the

lower room to fetch me the inevitable *caouah*, of which I swallow down the grounds with smiling resignation, just as I accept the cup from which their painted lips have drunk.

“Drink! I have tasted it! Thou art my friend, my sister; our house is thine!”

The husband of one of these friends of mine works in certain gardens of which he is the owner, that of another is a merchant in something, I am sure I don't know what; these two men are brothers, and their old mother is present at my interview with the wives, gloating over the praises she hears of her sons.

“Why should our husbands beat us, oh Rû-mîya? In the name of Allah, what can a man have to find fault with when the court has been swept and his winter bournouses have been spun and the *merga* (or soup)* is ready to be poured from the saucepan the moment he enters the house, after the prayer of the Maghrib.”

They are very indignant at hearing that the Rûmis of France think they are often ill-treated by their husbands.

“May they be anathema!” they say. “We do just what we like, oh Rûmîya, we buy the food we know is best. We bring our children up just

* The *kouskous* so often referred to are cooked in the steam from this soup, which resembles what the French call the *bouillon de pot-au-feu*.

as we please, as long as we train them in the path of justice and mercy. The money we earn by our work is our own, and will be, as long as it pleases Allah to let it be so."

All this is not, of course, said in such consecutive sentences as these, but comes out in exclamations abruptly repeated again and again, with sighs of indignation and regret. Then yet another cup of caouah is poured out for me, to cement our friendship and mark our confidence in each other. The neighbours, who have come in one by one, watch me drink it, and the peace of the hour wraps us about, whilst gentle hands press mine, their owners stealing their way into my heart.

"Thou art of gold, oh Rûmiya!"

It is true enough that they do what they like in the *seguias*, but they do it secretly and with circumspection. It was edifying to see these Fatmas, Aishas or Yaninas, when the Sidi, the husband or the father, himself escorted me to his home. In addition to the respect shewn to me personally, of which I have already spoken, there was a marked deference to the master, quite superficial, no doubt, and the result merely of training in good manners, but still it was there. If by chance the husband knows how to read the Koran, the deference becomes something like religious veneration. "He knows what Allah and the Prophet of Allah say!" exclaim the wives. For all that, however, this

veneration is often only skin deep, as betrayed by the following proverb, current among the women :

“Before the Sidi my tongue says ‘Yes, yes,’ but behind his back it turns round and says, ‘No, no.’”

When an Arab woman is not fiercely jealous she is always ready to praise her husband. She proudly shows off the presents he has given her, such as jewels, materials for dresses and finery. The husband gives the wife the money for the jewel she covets, and she takes it to the Jew goldsmith, who melts it to make the *m'zima*, or brooch, or the *m'chariffes*, or earrings, she orders. Quantities of silver coins and Louis-d'ors are thus converted every year into barbaric jewellery, not to speak of the actual 20 or 100 franc pieces worn just as they are.

An Arab woman glories in her husband's wisdom and boasts of his influence, but she delights in going where he does not wish her to go and doing what he has forbidden. It is just the same with the unmarried girls who are still under the surveillance of father and mother. For instance, I remember meeting two pretty young sisters who were amongst my friends, at a wedding, and they said to me: “Whatever you do, oh Rûmiya, do not mention to our lord and father that you saw us here, for we are come against his orders.”

Then when the wedding procession was to file

out into the street they wrapped themselves up in one huge veil, with such pretty graceful motions of their supple little figures towards each other that I could not help being charmed, and thus disguised they passed beneath the very beard of the dreaded Argus, who happened to be there at the moment. He looked at them without the slightest suspicion who they were. They breathed heavily beneath the white covering, and when they laughed there was much fluttering of the *maliffa*. With the one eye left visible and the one little finger holding the drapery against the swelling young bosoms, each girl made me some mischievous little signs, rogues that they were! But for all their temerity they were really very frightened, and an hour later, when they were laughing over their adventures at the house of the bridegroom, with veils thrown aside, they were still trembling. Their cheeks glowed with delight beneath the dye put on for the ceremony.

“The Sidi never recognized us!” they cried, “he did not know us in the least!”

It was a victory, and I seemed to them an accomplice in their success, as they began again the endless refrain: “Thou art our friend, our sister!”

It was on this occasion, too, that I first remember hearing the typical Oriental expression of cajoling endearment.



A WOMAN OF EL-AGHUAT.

“Oh, Rûmiya, give me that piece of tulle thou art wearing, and I will put it over my face that I may feel thy very presence about me.”

Amongst themselves they say all manner of tender things like that, reminding one of the fawning motions of a purring cat, until something suddenly reveals the sharp claws beneath the velvet paws, ready to rend and wound.

But I must tear myself away from these now familiar scenes, for the time has come to leave El-Aghuat and go to other *kusûr* less civilized and altogether more unadulterated. Farewell, farewell to many a home in which I was welcomed, and to which I was always glad to return, though I have not yet been able to describe them. I remember one in particular, where there was a dear old grandmother, an Hajajah, or one who had made the pilgrimage to Mecca or Cairo, who interested me extremely on account of the serene philosophy of her old-fashioned ideas. She was in fact one of those widows who, alone of her sex in these parts, offer up prayers or go to the mosque, and who are greatly honoured by the men. Then there was her little grandson, a charming urchin of six years old, whom I called El-Farrudje, or the Cock, because he was so fond of strutting on the terrace imitating the noises of the poultry yard. The pigeons cooed, the blue shadows deepened

beneath the pillared portico, for it was a real house, the home of well-to-do citizens. There was a carpet on the floor beneath the arcades and a portrait of the Shereef of Mecca pinned against the wall. And on the top of a trunk there were some empty bottles, serving as candlesticks. Unwonted luxury!

Adieu, dear old grandmother! Adieu, little grand-daughters! Adieu, El-Farrudje! I have promised to come back again some day. Yes, I must come back!

I wend my way along the so-called Marguerite Avenue in the Rûmi, or foreign quarter. The sun is beginning to set, and everywhere I can see the proud Caïds strolling about attended by their courts. It is the hour for the promenade, when people exchange news and gossip about politics. There are no shrill cries here of "*L'ah'lib! L'ah'lib!*" or "milk ho!" no little girls offering "*Krubs zudjs!*" or bread for sale; such things would be considered quite beneath the dignity of this aristocratic quarter. They are all very well for the rabble, but they won't do here, where everyone is of noble birth and dignified bearing, and where people walk about slowly as becomes those of good position.

And all the time in the densely populated Aulâd-Naïl settlement, down there in the steep street, the men are taking their rest during this time of



AN OLD BEGGAR.



repose in a different way, each seated at the threshold of his own hut, for every family has a separate dwelling, these dwellings being closely crowded together, with here and there an Arab café, from which, every evening, proceeds the noise of a mixed concert of tambourines, viols and *reichas*, or clarionets. Though it is now almost dark, the golden ornaments worn by the Aulâd-Nail gleam brightly, the flute-players are glad to rest their cheeks, swollen with much blowing, the violinists are repairing their strings. Someone is frying cakes hard by, and the soft air of twilight is laden with the acrid smell of hot honey. And in the narrower and steeper streets leading out of the principal square the old beggars are climbing up in the hope of getting some *kouskous*, lugging along the inevitable old pots they always carry : *Ya ah'bab Rebbi !* “ Oh, ye friends of the chief ! ”

Night falls upon the town, and from the tops of all the mosques ring out the benedictions of the prayer of 'Asha : *

“ God is greater than all ! *Allah akbar !* ”

* This is the prayer of supper-time, or night. The Moslems have five times of prayer : 1. *Subh*, or dawn ; 2. *Dhohr*, or noon ; 3. ' *Asr*, or afternoon ; 4. *Maghrib*, or sunset ; and 5. ' *Asha*, or after dark.—

CHAPTER VI.

THE WOMEN OF THE KUSÛR.

THE word *Kusûr* is the plural of *Kasr*, and it is a very difficult one to translate. Indeed, as is the case with all definite names in use in the Sahara, it is almost impossible to find an exact equivalent in any European language.

The kasr, in which will be found many women of Arab race much modified by the admixture of Berber blood, is a fortified village, the refuge of Arabs who are not nomads, or, to be strictly accurate, who only now and then lead a semi-nomad life. Grey walls, with loopholes for windows, grey hovels, grey alleys—the colour of the sandy earth of which they are built, stolen from the desert, but gradually returned to it, grain by grain and shred by shred, by the wind, which is ever eating away the very materials of the buildings.

Crowded together in the kasr are men, women, and children—traders, camels, and female dancers, whilst near the kasr is the oasis, with its dusty palms and quaint-looking wells, and all around

stretches the Sahara—sand, sand, nothing but sand, far away to the wide horizon, that undeviating monotonous line 'twixt earth and heaven. The dreary expanse of the desert is scarcely broken here and there by dunes and slight eminences or clumps of alfa and scattered bones, gleaming white beneath the burning sun of the day and the dew of the



night, for, although I am quite at a loss to explain the phenomenon, there actually is dew at night in spite of the all-pervading dryness of the soil.

The nomads pitch their tents in the shelter of the walls of the kasr, and now and then caravans halt outside them, so that the kasr is the meeting-place, and the exchange mart where pretty well everything is sold, from dates to caresses. Indeed,

the kasr of to-day reproduces a state of society but little altered since its grey gloom was the longed-for goal of a race very different from ours, and of an age long gone by, for the soul which looks out of the eyes of those who dwell there now, is wonderfully like that of the old wandering tribes. It seems as if the very spirit of the past—of a past so remote that its memory is dim—were gazing at us from those dark orbs, as if imprisoned souls, who never lived on earth, were making to us a mute appeal.

Everything and everybody is closely huddled together within the crumbling mud walls of the kasr, and its inhabitants might be the contemporaries of those who fed their flocks in the deserts of Arabia from that of Nefood to that of Dahna long before the time of Mohammed. I am not now, it must be remembered, speaking of the kusûr of the Berber mountains, but of those of the Aulâd-M'zi, which may be characterized as sentinels on the borders of the Sahara, of those kusûr in which the Arab element—of later date than the Berber—has impressed its manners, customs, and ideas on the older residents, without being correspondingly affected by theirs; for, at the most, the sedentary habits of the Berbers have taken very little root amongst the Arabs.

Nothing, in fact, is more truly Arab in every respect than are these little villages in which

the inhabitants certainly cannot claim to be of pure Arab race.

There are five kusûr belonging to the Aulâd-M'zi: namely, Aïn-Mahdi, Tadjemut, El-Hauïta, El-Assafiâ, and Kasr-el-Hiran. In the South, however, where the Shaânba live, the kasr is of rare occurrence, the wandering tribes, properly so called—who travel for long distances—are afraid of being brought under any control, even if purely nominal, and are content with mere temporary shelters for themselves and their grain, which they set up in the open desert near the groups of tents belonging to other races, whereas the kusûr of the Aulâd-M'zi enumerated above are regular towns of an almost permanent character, the noble origin and antiquity of which are a source of pride to their inhabitants, who boast to the people of the other kusûr of their civil wars as if they were titles of honour.

The warlike villages of the Aulâd-M'zi, each with its own Caïd, who, in his turn, is under a Caïd of Caïds, or an Agha living at a distance, afford us a very good idea of what El-Aghuat was two centuries, or less than two centuries, ago. But El-Aghuat has changed, whilst the little kasr has remained the same near its waterless wâdy. If by chance an Arab lieutenant, or some official bringing orders from the Agha, ventures into the village fortress, his appearance makes no more

difference than a stone would, if thrown into a garden. The starling, or *zerzur*, as the Arabs call it, one of the few birds of the desert, gives a cry of alarm, the branches shake, and a few ripe fruits fall to the ground; that is all; the garden is still exactly the same garden as it was before.

Even so the *kasr* is still the same *kasr*.

It does not matter in the least which of the five *kusûr* I take you to. It will be built on a little eminence, not lofty enough to be called a hill, and of very limited area, for the village will completely cover the summit. Shall we go to Tadjemut, so proudly situated, so proud of its women?—or shall it be to *Kasr-el-Hiran*, just as proud and self-satisfied. We will choose the latter for the sake of its picturesque name, which means the *kasr* of the little camels.

I will begin by relating a legend about it as simple as all pastoral legends always are. Once upon a time, before the civil wars, which would be still going on if the French conquest had not put an end to them, a certain rich man owned many flocks, and his camels grazed upon the meagre patches of the grass called *drinn*, already referred to, on the far-stretching plain. The female camels, who were great with young and were soon to give birth to many little ones, were resting beneath the clear light of the beautiful stars. Then as he lay in his tent, their wealthy owner thought to himself:

“How would it be if, with the aid of Allah, we were to make an enclosure on the little hill to protect the young camels?” For you good folks at home must know that young camels, called *hiran* till they are six months old and *m'khalil* till they are two years, are delicate fragile creatures, as fragile as the young turkeys of European farms, and the slightest



hardship or the least exposure to bad weather is enough to kill them.

So a shelter was made to protect the little camels, hideous little beasts that they were, but for all that the hope of their rich owner. Then, when they no longer needed it, the enclosure was enlarged and men took up their abode in it, crowding out all the camels, big or little, for whom there was no longer

any room within the narrow space. They had and still have to camp outside with the nomad portion of the tribe, but the name of Kasr-el-Hiran applies equally to the outlying tents as to the town itself.

I have been at some pains to secure exact information, and I have ascertained that there are 204 families, making up altogether 964 inhabitants, in this village of Kasr-el-Hiran. Small as the population is, the people are crowded together in a painful way, and, strange to relate, all the sub-divisions of the tribes are carefully kept up. There are no less than four, each under its own sheik, who is in his turn under the orders of the Caïd. The four sub-tribes are the Nuïrat under Sheik M'Barek-ben Khelifa, the M'taba under Sheik El-Hadj-Kuider-ben-Nébeg, the Aulâd-Khelifa under Sheik El-Haj-Khelifa, and lastly, the Nomads who are not able to stop long in any one place, but who hang on, so to speak, to the kasr where their father and their brothers live. They disappear and re-appear spasmodically, generally remaining at Kasr-el-Hiran for a couple of months every autumn under the leadership of a fourth Sheik, Belgacem ben Null by name. All this for 204 families.

The nomads own some thirty tents, which represent thirty families, and inside the kasr there are a few *gurbis* or small tents set apart for them, in which they store their grain. Except for the two months when, as I have said, they camp near the

town, they wander ceaselessly in the desert, letting their camels graze on the *drinn* and *alfa* to be found here and there.

It is the same everywhere throughout the Sahara, whether amongst the Mozabites, the Ghuâra, or other sedentary tribes, who are, so to speak, *en rapport* with every kasr or fraction of a kasr. Bound together by their common interests, though of alien caste and race, the people of the towns and the nomads cannot do without each other. The wanderers need a shelter sometimes, those who stop at home need messengers, and carriers for their merchandise. Hence arise entanglements, jealousies, quarrels, feuds, razzias, and reconciliations after mutual aggressions. If only one has the patience to wait and watch, there is, in fact, no place in the world more full of interest and romance than the Sahara.

When the nomads have taken their departure after their annual visit, the three remaining tribes of Kasr-el-Hiran, the Nuïrat, M'taba, and Aulâd-Khelifa settle down to their ordinary life, and things go on as they did before.

Five times a day the muezzin summons the men of the town to worship Allah and his prophet on the low terrace of the primitive mosque, and between whiles there are *caouah* to be drunk and one's private affairs to look after.

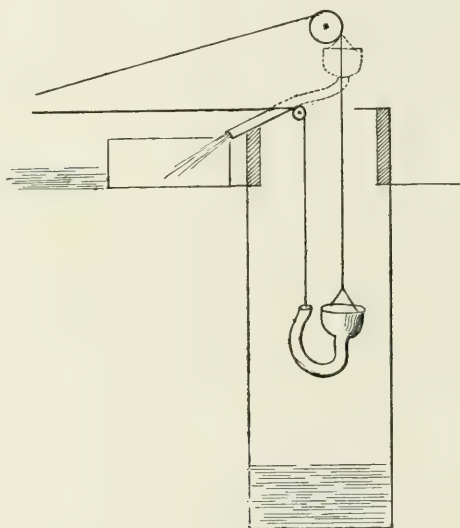
Some of the men are merchants, and ply their

trade in low dark shops, in which, except in those of the Jews, there seems to be absolutely nothing to sell. For all that, however, a great deal of business is done in these gloomy-looking holes, for stuffs, weapons, beads, vegetables and grain from Northern Algeria are bartered for the sheep and camels of the Larbâa and the carpets woven by the women of the kusûr. In the Shaânba kusûr, however, at El Golea for instance, wares from the Tell are exchanged for ostrich feathers and other natural products from places as far south as Guarra and Timbuktu.

Then there are skilled artificers in Kasr-el-Hiran, men who embroider saddles, make jewels, and do all kinds of needlework, for in these parts the men sew and the women weave. Most of them, however, are gardeners, who till very small gardens; but the crops they raise are enough, so little does the Arab need, to feed many inhabitants. Under these circumstances, the immense importance of the oasis will be readily understood; the oasis where the wells, of which there are about two hundred belonging to the village of Kasr-el-Hiran, enable a little scanty vegetation to grow, and a few palms to flourish. The number of wells varies according to the size of the oasis, and in many places there are more than there are at Kasr-el-Hiran. No wells: no dates, no vegetables; farewell to the slim tapering carrots; farewell to the hard beans

and the onions which give a relish to the *kouskous* stew. For the Wâdy-M'zi, that river of sand, only yields a few drops of brackish water once every five years at the most.

How shall I describe the well in the oasis? Its mechanism consists merely of a double pulley



worked by a double rope, which brings up a bucket peculiar to the country, made of goat-skin, which holds nearly forty quarts. This bucket ends in a long flexible tube, also of goat skin. To set the apparatus going, all available forces are pressed into the service, men, mules and camels being harnessed to the upper rope. These drag up the forty quarts of



A WELL IN THE OASIS.



liquid, no light weight of course, but when the bucket is about to come out of the water, the lower cord is very gently manipulated in such a manner as to make the flexible cylinder at the bottom of the bucket bend upwards till its end is on a level with the brim of the latter. Then, when the whole apparatus gets to the top of the well, the tube is turned over the lower pulley, and the precious stream of water is emptied into the reservoir, whence it is carried to the trenches or *seguias*, and thence to the patches of garden, which are watered by flooding them.

These details may appear trivial, but my readers must pardon me for giving them, and remember what they imply, the possibility of living in our humble little kasr !

The women of the kasr only go into the gardens now and then, just for a little change, or to gather a few baskets of fruit. Of course, I am only alluding to the lower classes, for the wife of the well-to-do has other duties. She must never do anything in the least like the out-door work performed by the men ; indeed, she must never on any account go out of her house.

For all that, however, out she does go, especially in a crowded place, such as Kasr-el-Hiran. The least thing is enough as an excuse for her absence ; she must go and see the neighbour who has just given birth to a boy ; she must visit her mother,

her aunt or her cousin ; or it is her pious duty to go and pay her respects at the heaps of stones beneath which sleep her departed parents. In principle, a male member of the family ought to chaperone her in all these little outings, but, as a matter of fact, he is generally represented by an old woman, a very complaisant old woman too, as a rule, for amongst the Arabs the Rubicon is easily crossed.

Observe, by the way, that it is the women themselves who stickle for this apparent reserve, this rule of never going out, except when closely veiled and properly escorted. To them it represents good form, and they would feel it quite beneath their dignity to dispense with restrictions. When some husband imbued with French ideas, as they call it, tries to modify these tiresome customs in the very slightest degree, he is always dreadfully snubbed, accused of being a wretch, a coward, all manner of horrible things ; his wife declares he no longer respects her, he is treating her as if she were a bad woman, or a nomad, or of low caste. And the less the unlucky husband cares about her being always veiled and sequestered, the more she insists upon sticking to every detail of etiquette, for to her these things represent being what the Europeans call a woman of the world, a term capable in the desert, as in France or England, of bearing many different interpretations.

It must, however, be remembered that these well-

to-do and privileged women—and how few after all are the luxuries and privileges they enjoy?—are quite in the minority, and there remain side by side with them the far more numerous wives and daughters of the poorer classes, who neglect the precautions taken by their wealthier sisters. At least they dispense with an escort, the veil is *de rigueur* everywhere. At the mere suggestion of their leaving it off, they will exclaim : “ Do you take us for savage Shaânbiyett *? Did not Allah say to the Prophet, ‘ Tell the wives of the faithful to let their veils fall to their feet ’ ”? In thus implying that Mohammed was the first to prescribe the use of the veil, the women of the kusûr betray their ignorance, for the custom is far older than that. Hagar, the mother of Ishmael, went about with her face uncovered because she was a slave, but Sarah, the wife, hid herself when the heavenly messengers came, and it was with her face covered that she left her tent to listen to the word of the Lord. The ruse practised by Tamar on her father-in-law could never have succeeded, but for the veil in which she wrapped herself, when she “sat in an open

* This is the plural of Shaânbiya as the women of the Shaânba tribe are called. The women of the sedentary tribes know next to nothing of the manners and customs of the Nomads, for they never go to their tents, and they mix them all up together in their minds. Now and then some old or poverty-stricken women from the dawars come into the towns, and they are supposed to be typical specimens of their Nomad sisters.

place by the way to Timnath." Judah could not recognise her, could not even guess who she was, for women do not wear veils in the presence of the men of their own family. She made herself a stranger to him by putting on the veil, and it was to the mystery in which she was shrouded that he succumbed.

Of course, the feminine society of the *kasr* is very limited, very exclusive, very prejudiced; for all its members belong to the same tribe, and are actuated by the same, or very similar, motives. There is, in fact, what business men would call a certain solidarity or community of interests about the women. They all have much the same virtues and much the same faults. Just as at El-Aghuat, there are clandestine outings, clandestine meetings, and the wives are as frivolous and as fond of wasting money as elsewhere. The husbands must put up with it all as best they can.

"Oh, Bakta!" says one, "I forbid thee to go to the Jew; I forbid thee to buy a new maliffa before the next fête day."

But the only result is, that Bakta goes to the Jew or buys her maliffa a little sooner than she would have done, for forbidden fruits are sweet. She not only buys the maliffa, but she also indulges in some of the little mirrors the Arab women are fond of wearing at the waist, and a purse, and perhaps some *ougayas* for her daughter. In fact,

she spends all the money she has, for the Jew gives nothing without actually receiving money down, no more do the Arab or the Mozabite merchants, alas !

Bakta will never learn reason till she gets her wrinkles, and then—— she will never acquire a taste for economy till she is too old to climb into the *bassur*, or palanquin, in which beautiful women travel or are taken to weddings. Then, and not till then, she will begin to work hard and to know what real fatigue means.

Until then, she takes her work in very small doses only : a little weaving, a little cooking and so on. The negresses do her washing for her, either as her resident servants or as poor women who go out by the day, and are paid for their labour with a measure of corn. Sometimes Bakta puts on a little spurt to finish a carpet she wishes to barter with the nomads for something else, and with the merchandize she gets in exchange, such as grain or dates, she will open a new credit with the Jew. Oh, what beautiful silk handkerchiefs, what lovely cotton stuffs, he has ! Do you suppose that the Shulamite women were proof against similar temptations when a caravan arrived from El-Hedjaz ? Do you imagine that the Sanaa shops, which existed long before the time of the Prophet, differed so very much from these Desert Stores where such a heterogeneous collection of wares

has accumulated? Do you suppose that the old Assyrian merchant who boasted of yore of his beautiful saffron-coloured scarves was any less astute than his modern prototype of the Sahara, who knows so well how to manage simple-hearted Bakta? No, indeed; and Bakta's heart swells with childish joy, with almost fierce elation, when she looks at her purchases, just as did that of Rebekah, the sister of Laban, when she saw the presents bought for her by the servant of Abraham, who had come to win her as a wife for his master's son Isaac.

It is ever the same in every age and clime. The heart of the young girl thrills at the sight of finery. In this one point, and this one point only, I note an affinity between a woman of the Sahara and a Parisian; both turn pale or blush with emotion as they tenderly handle the chiffon they are about to choose, and a sort of nervous tremor passes through them as they finally take up their precious purchases.

I used the word solidarity just now, in speaking of the women of the Sahara. Well, there is a very real and often touching solidarity, or reciprocity of charity. I mean in the mutual help given and the little services rendered to each other. Men, too, are always ready to come to the help, on the very first appeal, of those who want to build a new house or repair their old one. Everyone is eager



THE PALANQUIN OF THE SAHARA.

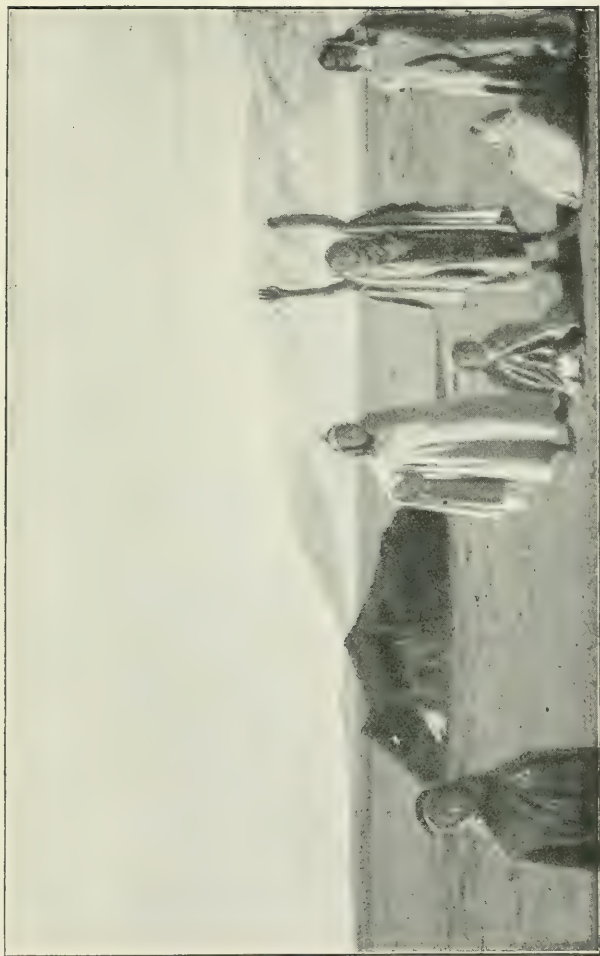
to do what he can. Saïd will get the wood ready for the terrace, Messaud will bring the bricks, Bachir the soil for making the mortar. All work hard, all become quite excited over the matter; and in next to no time the thing is done, without costing the owner of the dwelling anything but an "*Allah ikettar kherek*,"—may God reward you! Payment is made when those who have aided now in their turn require a similar service.

Amongst the women this mutual help takes a very pleasing and satisfactory form. I will try and give an example of what I mean.

Bakta, with whom we have just made friends, Bakta, the fourth wife of Saïd-ben-Nébeg, is very anxious to finish a burnous, either to barter as already described, or because her husband has told her to make it for him, the winter being at hand. Bakta has got the warp ready for making this burnous, but not the woof or weft, which is never prepared till the last minute, for, being soft and fluffy, it spoils if it is kept too long. It is amongst her friends and the daughters of her friends that she will get this necessary work done. Surely no one will refuse to help Bakta, who is always ready to lend a hand herself.

Having made sure that the stock of wool washed in the summer is sufficient, Bakta arrays herself in her visiting clothes, putting on all the finery she possesses. A chemisette with tulle sleeves, just like

the one the Caïd's wife wears, a green silk maliffa—but isn't it a little frayed, perhaps this blue one will be better? No, no, we will keep that for the great fête. Now Bakta, who has been stooping over her toilette, draws herself up, she arranges her maliffa, a long, straight piece of woven material, and it falls in soft drapery, converted by a touch here and a touch there into a complete dress, gathered in at the waist by a sash and fastened above the arms. Then out comes the dye, two dabs on the cheeks, some saffron on the lips, some kohl on the eye-brows, a little oil on the hair, and some scent sprinkled over all. Then, the nails having been reddened with henna the day before, Bakta twists the violet and yellow silk scarf about her head, which keeps the ougaya or veil in position; the ougaya, generally white, but sometimes coloured, being worn in the picturesque style of the queens and noble ladies of the middle ages, the silk scarf or a turban called the *maharma*, taking the place of the crown, and the ougaya falling down the back below the waist. So far so good. Now Bakta dons her ornaments, her necklaces, her heavy ear-rings, three in each ear, and her many rings. She feels in her bosom to make sure that her silver reliquary containing a Sûrah from the holy Koran is safe in its usual place. Has she got everything now? Yes, everything. She pulled out any grey hairs that may have appeared this morning, and she washed herself—she doesn't



BOYS OF THE DESERT AND THE KASR.

remember when exactly. What could the most exacting critic desire more ?

“ Ahmed ! ” she cries, “ Ahmed-ben-Nébeg ! Come here ! ”

Ahmed is her young brother-in-law, whom she now summons to escort her from door to door, and who, during her visits, will wait for her patiently outside, for he must not enter the houses of women who are no relation to him. The two sally forth together, Bakta hermetically sealed up, so to speak, in her veil, which is thrown over her complete get-up, for you must know that the *ougaya* already described is no use as a protection ; the real veil necessary to decorum is a large piece of stuff, which the wearer holds against the breast with one hand, and which leaves only one eye visible.

Ahmed, the little escort, is in his oldest clothes and carelessly carries an ancient matchlock. The companions pause at the door of Mabruka, the wife of Ben-Salem. Tap ! Tap ! Tap ! Nobody comes. Ahmed squats down in the sun or the shade as the humour takes him, and waits whilst Bakta goes on knocking. “ *Hell-el-Bab !* open the door,” she cries, and at last the door does open, and she disappears in the dark passage revealed for a moment. Ahmed goes to sleep or amuses himself by thinking of the games of chance he means to have presently with the nomads.

I need not tell you, of course, that Bakta is

received with the most lively expressions of affection. "Our house is thine! etc." I will spare you the rest. If the modern *caouah* is not offered to her something else is, for hospitality necessitates it. All this tender flattery, this eagerness to offer oneself and all that one owns to one's friend, is ingrain in the soul of the race to which these women belong. "Drink! Drink, oh my guest!" they cry, "eat until thou art satisfied." And even if interested motives come in sometimes, they really do not prevent the expressions of affection being sincere for the moment at least, even when the guests are Rûmis. Those who do not understand this will never understand other peculiarities of these people, who hate all Europeans.

The news having been exchanged, the offered food consumed and the various conventional remarks made, Bakta makes up her mind to reveal the motive of her visit. She invites the young ladies of the household and the children to boot to come to her on such and such a day, if it please Allah, to help her with the *guïam* or woof of a burnous, this woof as already stated being light, fleecy and easily spoiled.

"Oh yes, yes; with all my heart!" each one replies.

Bakta in her turn answers :

"Thank you, may Allah increase thy knowledge of all good things!"

Then, after expressing many other hopes she takes her departure and wakes up Ahmed-ben-Nébeg, who goes to sleep again a few steps further on.

In the next house fresh caresses are exchanged, fresh dates consumed, fresh mint tea drunk out of little cups made of plaited alfa. In fact the whole scene, including the invitation to help with the *guïam* of the burnous, is repeated in every house.

"With pleasure, with all my heart!" everyone replies.

And all these warm-hearted women, young and old, are punctual at the rendezvous, apologizing for not being *en grande toilette*. They have all come in their old clothes to help make the *guïam* of the burnous.

The meeting is really a regular fête, a working fête if you will, but a very happy one, at which a lot of gay chattering is done. Plenty of mint tea keeps up the courage of the workers, for the task they have to perform is really a very tiring one. Three things are needed by each of the woof makers: a kind of flat dish or plate of wood or earthenware, a long spindle, and a — I am almost afraid to mention the third thing, lest I should shock my European readers, who will, perhaps, faint when they hear what it is. Well, I will try to explain. The spinner, squatting on the ground, fastens the wool she has to draw out on to the end of her spindle, places the spindle upright

on its other end in the wooden plate, and this plate she brings close to the third thing I am so shy of mentioning, which—for the murder must out—is her own leg, her leg bared from hip to knee. Needless to add that her dress is pulled well up above her hip. Then the spindles, kept in place against the bare leg of the worker, are flung by her skilful hand, and go rapidly round and round, their gyratory motion aided by the glazed surface of the plate, which serves as a kind of trough, whilst the skin of the spinner's leg, held taut, so to speak, acts as a groove. Round and round they go, kept carefully balanced upon the side of the hip, and down again on the inner side of the knee. Nobody thinks any harm. The mischievous and fickle god of love has nothing to do with real work such as this, and, of course, only the women of the family are allowed to be present at these quaint spinning bees of the Sahara.

All the time the workers laugh and talk and tell each other stories. They are all thoroughly happy together ; it is a most charming, most innocent, and most useful meeting, which sometimes lasts for as long as three consecutive days.

Truly, there is something very naïve and touching about the whole arrangement, it is all so perfectly innocent and natural. Kindness, unselfishness, good-fellowship, are all involved in it ; virtues

which the extravagance and display of the modern woman of fashion in Europe have done much to destroy.

For observe : they all help Bakta, who is far from being poor, but they would be just as ready to help the most wretched woman of the kasr. They will go and stretch the threads of the web on her carpet frame for her, a piece of work requiring the aid of no less than ten skilful hands ; they will grind her corn for her, take care of her when she is ill, and feed her when she is hungry. All this should make amends for the bare legs, should it not ? And then, you know, the kasr really belongs to a time so very remote, although the actual date of the Kasr-el-Hiran is quite modern, for it was founded in the sixteenth century of our era, and only became the fortress it now is as recently as 1801, the *Umm-el-Khobeir*, or year which was the mother of mallows, and was so fertile, so rich in blessings. This does not, however, destroy the impression of antiquity produced by this old-world town, for the people who dwell in it date their origin from thousands of years back. It is, indeed, the immense antiquity of its inhabitants, with their intense love for the traditions of a past so very remote, which makes the little settlement appear so ancient. Modern it may be so far as the materials it is built of go, but its soul, its inner *ego*, is the outcome of centuries upon centuries.

It has been in the brief time since 1801, that all the wars, all the struggles, all the assaults through which Kasr-el-Hiran has passed, have taken place.

Do not be afraid. I will not inflict them all upon you. You would be crushed beneath the weight of all the exciting annals, telling how the M'talia slew the Rahmân, or betrayed the Aulâd-Zanûn, or revenged themselves on the M'khâlif. All these conflicts seem to have culminated in the assault on Kasr-el-Hiran, when Abd-el-Kader demanded the giving up of his treacherous lieutenant, el-Hâj-el-Arbi, who had taken refuge within its walls, and was hidden by its inhabitants. Boiling oil, melted butter, and tar were poured upon the heads of the besiegers, and saucepans full of cinders were flung down with a tremendous noise from the ramparts upon the dromedaries, who were driving the enemies of their masters before them. Pots were smashed, cinders and ashes flew about ; oh, it was a terrible scene !

This siege, worthy of description by an epic poet, had its heroine, a Joan of Arc with Oriental tresses, who wore many veils, many necklaces, and whose garments smelt of cloves and musk. This was a certain damsel named Aisha bint Mihûd, called the most beautiful on account of her many charms, who, seeing the enemy planting his standard at the very base of the defences of the town, rushed

down into the *mêlée*, and, seizing the banner of the foe, she turned to the warriors of the town, crying : “ Cowards that ye are, ye men of Kasr-el-Hiran. Must a woman show you your duty, and set you an example of courage ? ”

The story goes that she promised to be the bride of the victor, and that after this appeal the men of Kasr-el-Hiran fought like lions, the followers of Abdel-Kader were put to flight, but I have not been able to find out which of the victorious warriors received the reward. No one who hears this legend can justly accuse the men of the Sahara of looking upon woman as a mere beast of burden, a mere slave to their passions. No. I assert and shall always be ready to assert that the women of the Sahara, the women of the *kusûr*, however childish and limited their ideas may be, are not to be pitied. They are suited to their environment, to the position to which they are born. I consider them, indeed, far less to be pitied than the work or peasant woman of Europe, less to be pitied than the female clerks at home, who receive some forty or fifty pounds a year as wages and have to keep themselves out of that mere pittance. The household work the Saharian women have to do is very light, and they have plenty of the leisure they enjoy so much. Above all, they have what our European women certainly lack, and what at first sight no one would expect of the simple children of the Desert ; a true apprecia-

tion, an intense love for the beauty of the brilliant sunshine, the soothing shade, the sublime harmony of their native land. This feeling for beauty makes up to them for the intellectual tastes with which, nowadays, we try to imbue the women of Europe. It gives them a taste of the very highest joy of which a human creature is capable.



In a word, the women of the Sahara know how to dream, and more than that, they know of what they dream, every one of them, whether she be virtuous or not, rich or poor ; and when they gaze up into the dark blue sky at night and see the silvery stars shining so clearly and so brightly, just as they did in the days of the wise men of the East, these women, who are their descendants and their true daughters, have a foretaste of eternity in spite of the Koran—in spite of everything.

CHAPTER VII.

THE WÂDY M'ZAB AND THE SEVEN HOLY CITIES.

I HAVE already said that the kusûr are inhabited by a mixed race, in which the Arab element predominates over the Berber, but there are many purely Berber groups, some sedentary, others nomad, in the Sahara. Those who travel in caravans, whether merely to see the country, to trade, or to fight, must of necessity pass through one of these Berber settlements, that known as the Wâdy M'zab, where live the Beni-M'zab or Mozabites, who dwell, in the strictest, most carefully guarded seclusion, at the very point of junction of those untraced tracks across the desert, the great caravan routes between In-Saleh and Gabes, the Tell and Timbuktu, where the only sign-posts are the bleached bones of camels.

It is not, however, be it remembered, the Beni-M'zab who have elected to settle on these routes of leisurely travel, it is the routes which have, so to speak, chosen to converge on their Wâdy.

Oh, those quaint Beni-M'zab! how utterly

remote, lost, and out of the way their home appeared to me at first, yet now I look upon it as quite central. It is in fact like one of the inhabited islands dotted about in the vast expanses of the great Oceans. Only an island is generally above the level of the water, whereas the Wâdy M'zab is



a hole below the level of the sand, a sudden rift in the plateau, an oval-shaped fissure some three hundred feet deep at its lowest point.

Curious, little-known, little-appreciated country, the so-called occupation of which by the French took place as recently as 1802, but which so far has attracted no emigrants, not so much as a

few humble miners. It has remained the Wâdy M'zab, with its queer, mysterious religion, and in our eyes wild and dissolute yet childish people, subject to the French, but as yet not assimilated in the very slightest degree. In this remote Wâdy there are wretched hovels and full purses, arid soil in which nothing will grow, and fertile gardens, loving-kindness and cruelty ; in a word, it is a land of strong contrasts, the people of which we quite fail to understand. I really believe that if we went to the planet Mars, the inhabitants would seem less strange to us than do these good Mozabites.

It takes five Arabs, says a Saharian proverb, to get the better of one Algerian Jew, and five Jews to get the better of one Mozabite. Sometimes indeed it is quite impossible to be even with a Mozabite.

In fact the Mozabite gets his subtle trading instinct from a very ancient source, it is in his very blood ; for Berber as he is, he traces his descent from the Phœnicians. Or, to speak more clearly, he is distinguished from the rest of the Berber tribes by an unmistakeable Tyrrhenian strain. The patient observer will not fail to find confirmation of this assertion in the habits, superstitions, and other peculiarities we shall notice in this chapter, as well as in the peculiar form of the monuments of the Wâdy M'zab.

I will spare you the long course of reasoning

on which I found my ethnological theory. You must know, however, that it is by no means arbitrary. The Phœnician Carthage ruled for eight centuries over the seaboard of what is now Kabyle, and even after her destruction her influence was felt in the colonies. It is indeed an historical fact that the Mozabites were driven back from the coast into the desert on the South fifty years after the celebrated conquest of Alexandria by Omar. Moreover, the minarets of the Mozabite mosques, unique as they are now, are exactly like some I have seen represented in the precious papyri from Egypt and Tyre now in the collection at Vienna belonging to the Archduke Rainer.

We grant then that the Mozabites are of Phœnician origin, with a dash of Numidian blood, and of that of yet more ancient native races. Descendants of the wealthy merchants who traded as far west as England, they, too, at the present day are most eager traders, carrying on their business throughout Algeria and in the Tell. They are to be met with in all the towns, in the dark recesses of the shops, noticeable for their stout figures, their crafty expression and their many-coloured *ganduras*. Every two years they return to the Wâdy M'zab to cheer the widowhood of their deserted wives, as is prescribed in the commentaries on the Koran, at least in those of the 'Abadiyeh sect, to which they belong.

For now-a-days they are Mussulmans, but dissenters of the fifth sect, there being four others recognized at Mecca and by the Sultan. They are alike schismatics and Puritans ; they fast to excess, and reject the mystic doctrines of the marabouts, who are venerated and subsidized by the rest of the faithful. They also make many



prayers, at least when their devotions do not interfere with trade.

To them an orthodox Arab is a dog, whilst they themselves are dogs to the orthodox Arab. This, of course, does not ease the wheels of their relations with their nomad neighbours. Indeed it was this which brought upon them, soon after their conversion to Islamism, the misfortunes resulting

in the foundation of the remote settlement in that lonely rift of the desert converted by the hand of man into the present deep depression known as the Wâdy M'zab.

This was how the whole thing came about !

To begin with, a rival sect, that of the Wahâbi-Sûfis, had driven the Mozabites from the coasts of the Mediterranean to the distant country in which rises the town of Wargla, where, for good or for evil as the case may be, they founded two colonies known as Khrima and Cedrata. Forty years after the foundation of the latter town their persecutors drove them out of it, because, dogs that they were, they would not abjure their heresies. They had just finished building a fine monument, which was at once destroyed by the fierce iconoclast Wahâbis.

A year or two ago the ruins of Cedrata, the site of which is indicated in old Mozabite chronicles, were dug out of the deep sand which had completely buried them. They indicate a more advanced, in fact more Phœnician, civilization than do the modern Mozabite buildings. In the chief houses several fine rooms surrounded a central atrium, and the slaves' quarters were situated behind the kitchen. In contradistinction to the Arab custom—and this proves the difference of origin of the two races—none of the mouldings were in plaster, but a rather coarse-grained

cement was used for decorative purposes and for the inscriptions on the walls.

Truly our ex-merchants of Carthage found themselves on the horns of a dilemma. Not knowing what to do to escape their persecutors, they took refuge in the most arid, the most desolate and deserted, place they could find in the Sahara. There was already a deep rift, a sudden gap in the lofty sterile plateau, choked up it is true with sand, sand, and yet more sand, but it was capable of development, and the Mozabites decided to take refuge in it. They made their mercenaries—for, fresh from Carthage, of course they too had their mercenaries—dig wells and plant palms, and had ere long established themselves on the little acclivities which broke the general desolation. These they fortified, and in course of time their settlements grew into towns.

It will be readily understood that, as they had been persecuted for their belief, which they dignified by the name of religion, the Mozabites soon arrogated to themselves the title of saints. Their cities became holy cities, and one of them, Benzguen, was declared to be the most holy of all. To this day no one enters it on horseback, and to smoke in it would be to commit sacrilege. No card-playing, no singing, no drinking is allowed in it. All profane pleasures are forbidden. Alas! that I must add, evil tongues declare that,

as elsewhere, the greater the saint the greater the sinner, and the people in the neighbourhood of Ben-Izguen liken it to Sodom and Gomorrah.

Well, here we are at last, if by a bad road, safely arrived at Wâdy M'zab, as it was in the 19th century of our era! Let us climb up on to the rugged height which dominates the valley.

On every side we find death, nothing but death! Black, melancholy-looking stones strew the arid soil. We have been marching for miles and miles, for days and days, through monotonous districts, all exactly alike, and have come quite suddenly, when we least expected it, upon the Wâdy M'zab lying stretched at our feet, with its holy cities looking, in spite of all the sand it contains, like a veritable Eden in the Desert. There are clumps of palms and there are towns, which, from a distance at least, are not unlike those of Europe. There are wells, gardens, vegetation, even flowers! Forgetting the sins of its people, we feel as if we were approaching Paradise. And, truth to tell, the Mozabites—industrious, persevering and patient, as they are, with many virtues to set against their defects—really do deserve our gratitude and indulgence, if only for the delightful surprise their valley is to the weary traveller.

Five of the holy cities in this Wâdy are within sight of each other, namely: Ghardaya, the capital, Melika, Ben-Izguen, Bou-Noura, and

El-Ateuf. The other two, Berryan and Guerra, are on the upper plateau. The inhabitants of the whole valley number some 32,000 altogether.

Seen from the brow of the plateau, the holy cities are all exactly alike, so much so, that one might easily be taken for the other; for all



have yellow or grey houses, with arcades and niches, looking from a distance like bee-hives. The minarets of the mosques are all alike, so are the little forts, so are the towers!

Each town is governed by a Caïd and a sort of council, called a *jemba*, which looks after

the affairs of the community as a whole, for the Mozabite settlements form a confederation, still maintained even since the French occupation ; but this confederation cannot be called a fraternity, for civil war has been of constant occurrence.

Civil war and trade ; these are the two chief occupations of the Wâdy M'zab, and just now the latter is entirely in the ascendant.

Honour to whom honour is due ! We will consider trade to begin with, premising that it is honestly carried on. Everywhere we see the Mozabite behind his counter, his horn spectacles upon his nose, scribbling down columns of notes and figures in his account-book, writing them from left to right, as is the Oriental fashion.

Trade may be divided into three principal sorts, namely, the caravan trade, of which one of the chief emporiums is the Wâdy-M'zab ; the trade carried on in shops in all the Algerian and Tunisian towns to which the Mozabites emigrate ; and the more modest retail home trade.

It must not be forgotten that the Sahara—no single district of which produces all the necessary articles of consumption—lives by barter, and this barter is effected by the agency of the Mozabite, whose capital permits him to indulge in speculation. The Wâdy-M'zab is, therefore, one of the great markets of the Sahara. The most important transactions take place to a certain extent in

private, but in the public streets a good deal of business of a less remunerative kind is done.

The chief articles brought to the Wâdy-M'zab and sold in the shops are wool, grain, fruit, woven materials, embroideries, haberdashery, weapons and harness. Pawnbroking and lending money on usury are also practised, and the M'zab merchants do not disdain petty transactions in which only a few sous are risked.

What may be called the trade carried on in the street, or partly in the street, is the most picturesque, but not nearly so lucrative as the more private business done. I mean, for instance, the sale of meat and of wood. The latter is a most valuable commodity, brought from a long distance off, for palm wood is useless as fuel. Each little stick is weighed separately, sometimes as often as seven times, and no end of discussion goes on before a bargain is finally struck.

Most of the Mozabites are very religious and do a lot of praying before, during, or after their trading. They are very particular about their genuflexions, of which they indulge in a great number. If one of them is travelling in a public vehicle, it must be stopped in the open country, for him to get out and say his prayers at the right time according to the prescribed rites of his sect.

Two of the Abadite mosques made an especially profound impression upon me. I often fancy myself

back in the town of Berryan, having just left the presence of the Caïd, a very typical personage, who, in spite of myself, I could not help fancying to have been a Carthaginian merchant of the already troublous times of Hasdrubal and Hamilcar. He was a very rich man, and what with his capital, his obstinate will, his moral and physical strength,



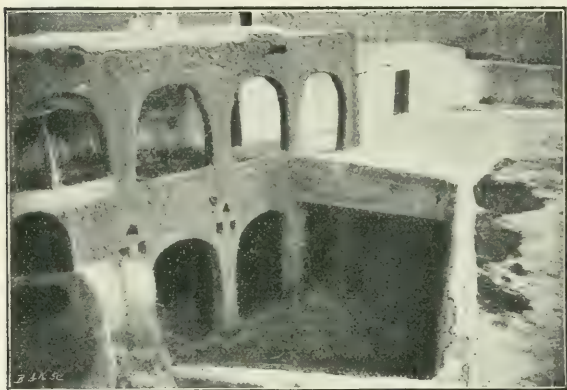
his perseverance, his duplicity, his pride, and his versatility, well worthy to belong to that great Barca family. He only needed a wider sphere than the Wady M'zab to do as great things as the merchant princes from whom he was probably descended, for he had all the necessary qualities of a great merchant.

Now I naturally supposed that a temple in which

such important personages as my friend the Caïd of Berryan worshipped God five times a day, praying Him to bless their enterprises, and to further their interests in every way, would be beautifully decorated, if not quite equal in splendour to the sanctuaries of Tanith, or Baal-Haman, and, behold! here I was stumbling about in a wretched, gloomy little court, with miserable niches, dark corners, and tattered awnings. A humble building truly, very old for this land, where everything crumbles away, making me doubt whether, after all, these Mozabites are really of Carthaginian origin. But I was wrong, as the sight of the mines of Cedrata has since proved to me, not to speak of Punic architectural details on the top of the Berryan Tower itself.

What, I asked myself then, could be the cause of the dilapidated state of this miserable little mosque? A moment's reflection sufficed to make the whole thing clear to me. In olden times, before the Exodus, first to the Wâdy Mya, and later to the primitive Wâdy M'zab, then quite uncultivated, the climate and the materials for building were such that no better structures could be produced. A habit of economy had been induced, and this habit tradition had confirmed. Evil tongues might, perhaps, say that love of money was really at the root of the matter, but this, I think, would be unfair. As I looked at

the faithful jostling each other in the narrow passages, they seemed to be muttering some such explanation as this : " By the great sheikh, Jacob, Allah, the all-powerful, enjoys such splendour in the seven heavens, that He cannot distinguish the mean from the sumptuous at such a distance as He is above the earth down below. We have



shade in which to say our prayers ; that is all we want. It is really better so, for we pray more earnestly in a poor church, because the eyes of the body find nothing in it to distract the eyes of the soul, and because our hearts are not affected by seeing money wasted ! "

Later, the worshippers I saw in the mosque at Ghardaya, the capital, gave me very similar impressions. The crumbling grey walls, the gaping

arches, the wretched little places in which the vessels for ablutions were kept, were all of a most inferior description ; yet from the top of the terraces of the town, I could see in the foreground the solid iron doors of the private houses, and further away, the clean, well-built streets, opening on to good ramparts and bastions.

The excellent Caïd of Ghardaya, less Carthaginian, but more cheerful, than his brother of Berryan, pretended that he had sprained his foot, so as to get out of having to do the honours of the mosque for us himself. For here the presence in the sacred building of Rûmis is looked upon as so great a profanation that he did not want to seem to sanction it. As for persuading the said Rûmis to give up their sacrilegious visit, he had no hope of that. "By the name of Allah," he probably said to himself, "these victorious Rûmis are incorrigibly curious."

I can assert, however, that, Rûmis though we were, we were very reasonable. We did not contaminate by contact with our feet the praying-mats on which the faithful were prostrated in silent devotion. Our very presence, however, so evidently annoyed and distressed the worshippers, that we quickly withdrew to the summit of the cracked tower of the mosque, guided up the pitch-dark staircase by a semi-hostile sacristan with a lantern.

From this tower a view is obtained of nearly the whole of the Wâdy M'zab. The symmetrical pyramids of the holy cities rise up so near to each other that, according to official documents, they could all five be enclosed in a circular wall measuring some three miles and a half. Every here and there, between the green patches of verdure of the oases and the russet-brown stretches of sand, were what looked like raised and paved platforms, gleaming white in the sunshine amidst the rough stones with which the desert was strewn.

"What are they?" we asked of the sullen sacristan.

"Cemeteries," was the reply. "There are several for each town. Those raised white platforms you see are for the use of mourners who can go and weep in them for the departed, without any fear of soiling their fine burnouses." Truth to tell, these melancholy-looking platforms reminded me at this distance of the Towers of Silence of certain parts of India, only there were no dead bodies and no vultures.

They are surrounded by tombs, which are mere piles of unworked stones with no inscriptions, not a sign to shew who rests beneath them. None but Saints and perhaps a few rich men have a right to the mausoleums which the sacristan pointed out to us down below: quaint-looking round or pointed cupolas made of sham stone rising



TOMES OF THE SAINTS IN THE WĀDY M'ZAR.

up to Heaven in a manner which seems very incongruous here, and recalls the religious customs of Nineveh and Tyre.

On the graves of those who have not achieved the dignity of sainthood, rags and broken pottery are thrown as well as stones. This custom is a relic of the worship of spirits to which I shall refer again later, and the accumulated débris serves also for identification of the tomb. Blind old women indeed sometimes recognize the last resting place of some loved one by feeling the pieces of broken pottery strewn on it.

And we Rûmis, aliens in a foreign town amongst a people sullenly hostile to us, as we look down from our minaret upon these tombs and platforms, seem to see in the broken pottery strewing the former, an emblem of the cup of life, drained and emptied by those cut off by death. And as the nasal droning of the Mozabite devotions is wafted up to us our melancholy becomes tinged with a kind of fatalist resignation.

But it is time we left this lofty position with its depressing associations. Shall I talk to you instead of the school connected with every mosque, where the Mozabite children are taught to recite the Koran? Well, these schools are supported by a commercial tax on dates, a tribute paid in kind. Teachers, scholars, *muftis*, or doctors of the law, and *imans* or priests, are all supported

entirely by the impost on these sweet fruits. When there is any stock of them left at the end of the year, they are sold for the maintenance of the priests, or the proceeds are given away in alms.

Or shall I talk to you about the social class, or rather the caste of the so-called *tolbas* or theologists? These are the very pillars of virtue, the candidates for what I may call official sanctity, who move about in the streets with measured steps, and grave, modest demeanour, draped in fine white linen; never indulging in any colour. They must lead, or appear to lead, pure and chaste lives, for, alas! amongst the Mozabites to be, and to appear to be, are far more synonymous terms than they once were! As is well known, these *tolbas* are the guardians of sacred tradition, the expounders alike of the civil and the ecclesiastical law in all Mussulman countries. In the Wâdy M'zab, they diligently keep up the schism between their sect and the rest of the Mahommedans, which schism consists in denying amongst other things the sacred books of the Arabs; those three *hadiths*, or precepts of the *Sûnna*, as Mahomet's oral teaching is called, propagated after the death of the Prophet by his disciples, his nephew Ali, and his beloved young wife, Aisha, the daughter of Abu-Bekr. They eagerly discuss one preliminary point of the utmost importance: did this same Aisha, pretty frivolous girl that she was, forget her duty

one day in company with the handsome Safrann? Deeply interesting problem, about which the *tolbas* of Ben Izguen and those of Ghardaya were for long at daggers drawn, the theological dispute on the burning question being all the hotter because their brethren of El-Ateuf and Melika could not agree about it either.

To us Europeans, this reads like a caricature of the truth. But there is really nothing exaggerated or surprising about it, for there is something of the buffoon in every Mozabite, and with him there is always a comic element, even in the most serious subjects.

The Mozabites are all stout fellows, and mounted on their donkeys, who have more spirit than they have, they are very like Sancho Panza, only there are no Don Quixotes in their country. They wear canary-coloured slippers, and their dress is much the same as that of the Arab, except for the striped *ganduras* or *abayas* they sport when in *négligé* costume.

From all that I have said about the absorption of the Mozabite in business and in prayer, it might be supposed that three-fourths of his time being consumed in them he would not be able personally to fulfil the precept of Voltaire's *Candide*: "Cultivate your garden," and yet the beautiful gardens of the oases prove that the land is certainly

not allowed to lie fallow. Here is the explanation of the mystery : without counting his workmen and the cultivators of his distant farms, his *khammes* at Wargla, for instance, the Mozabite has two sets of servants to help him with his home agriculture. These servants are slaves, nominally freed, and hired labourers, their employment being a survival of the old Carthaginian system, destroyed in principle by the French annexation of the country, but still in vogue for all that.

The slaves are negroes brought from the Soudan by caravans, and since their forced emancipation in 1802, they have remained servants either with or without wages. Their position in the family, which was from the first a comfortable one enough, is practically unchanged. How much there is to be said on that subject !—but I shall recur to it again later ; for the moment we will speak of the hired servants or mercenaries only.

The word mercenary sounds strange in our modern ears. It carries us back in imagination to Carthage, to the ancient Hipponi, a Punic city even before the time of the Romans. We recall the later arrival of the warriors of Islam, the first expulsions of heretics in the name of religious dogma ; and in so doing we get something of an inkling of the state of mind of the future Mozabites, the cowardly merchants driven into the Sahara, bewildered in the vast trackless desert. “ Alas ! how

are we to defend ourselves," they must have cried, "how are we to fight?" They were accustomed to buy and sell weapons, not to use them.

Then, turning to account the money which I believe they took with them in their exile, they found a way out of their difficulty. Following the traditions of the old capital of their native



country, they converted the pastoral people whose tents were pitched near their own infant cities into their mercenaries. That ancient Carthaginian tradition is a stubborn one, dying very hard—in fact, it is really not dead yet.

These pastoral tribes were soon organized into a kind of feudal militia, the Mozabites of Berryan pressing into their service the Aulâd-Yaya, the people of Ghardaya, the Beni-Merzug with certain of the Shaânba tribes. The weapons

and camels of the mercenaries became practically the property of the new Mozabite masters, in whose pay their owners were, and it was the duty of these mercenaries to go forth against the enemies of their lords, to escort convoys and caravans as far as the Soudan, etc. The relations, practically those of master and serf are transmitted from father and son, neither dreaming of shirking his share of the bargain. I must add, however, that some of the Shaânba are not quite so faithful to their obligations, and will sell themselves to the highest bidders, not scrupling even to betray their masters sometimes.

Sometimes, too, there are internecine quarrels between *soff* and *soff*, as political parties are called in the Sahara, when, perhaps, the men of Ghardaya send their mercenaries to cut the throats of the people of Melika or vice-versa, for there is no one more pugnacious than the Mozabite when he is not in the way of receiving any blows himself. Nothing but the vigorously enforced supremacy of the French has been able to suppress these constant civil broils, resulting in what can only be called assassinations and massacres. In spite, however, of the comparative tranquillity of the country under the new *régime*, the mercenaries are still necessary. Who but they will watch over the flocks? Who will protect the stores and caravans against the raids of pillagers? Who else, weapon on shoulder, will

escort the camels, laden with valuable merchandise ? All these questions, moreover, can be asked the other way round. Who but the Mozabite will give employment to the mercenary ? Who else will repair his house ? Who will feed him, his wife, and his children, in bad years ? Who will replace the few beasts of burden owned by the mercenary when they succumb to sudden attacks of distemper ?

All this seems logical enough, but I do not suppose that when that worthy old fellow Hamilcar Barca bought and sold, speculated and organized his mercenaries, or when he accumulated stores to re-victual his irregular troops, he foresaw these Carthaginian descendants of his who dwell in the desert of Sahara.

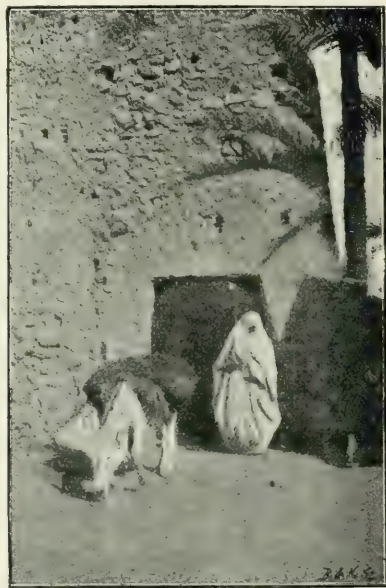
CHAPTER VIII.

AMONG THE MOZABITE WOMEN.

EVER since my arrival in the Wâdy M'zab, I have been anxiously wondering if I should have to spend all my time looking at cemeteries and mosques, or wandering about amongst the shops, which, by the way, are curious enough. Should I have to leave the country without having seen any of the women, and be content with vague information supplied by those who have never set eyes on them either, and who used to say to me, shaking their heads, "Madame, it is quite impossible!"

Quite impossible to go and see the Mozabite women! I felt not unnaturally incredulous, spoiled as I had been by the kind welcome I had received from all the Arab and Berber women I had visited elsewhere. The more I insisted, however, the greater were the obstacles thrown in my way; and the greater the obstacles, the more eager did I, of course, become to overcome them. I had heard that the M'zambiya, or Mozabite woman, has a pink and white complexion and is of rather a large build,

and I was under the impression, though I could not be sure, for I rely on the evidence of my own eyes only, that she enjoys less freedom than any of her sex in the Sahara. She dwells behind lofty walls, of smooth, unbroken surface, which give to every



house a misleading appearance of strength. She is scarcely ever allowed to visit the tombs of the dear ones she has lost, or to see the few friends she owns ; indeed, she only meets them at weddings ; and even on such occasions she is packed up, not in a veil, but in a huge thick woollen covering, either grey or white, from which not so much as

the one bright eye I used to see at El Aghuat peeps out, and this veil so completely disguises her that no one can tell in the least what she is like or how she walks.

I knew, too, this time not from mere hearsay, but for a well-authenticated fact, that the M'zabiya is protected alike by what are called the laws of emigration and—extraordinary expression!—of the shirt! Truly there is nothing more quaint in the Mussulman system of theology than this law of the shirt, retained, perfected, and added to by the Mozabite heretics and proudly boasted of by them as a guarantee of their conjugal felicity, an infallible means of patching up any flaws in the marriage contract or offences against marital fidelity.

It will be remembered that the Mozabite merchant who leaves home on business has to return every two years to look after his gardens and console his wife for his absence. The latter, in fact has a right to divorce without appeal if he outstays his two years. Moreover, which is a far greater preventive of forgetfulness, she can take her husband's property away as well as her own when she leaves his roof. Now, to keep her patient whilst he is away, the Mozabite takes certain precautions. When the sad moment for parting comes, he places one of his shirts in his own place on the nuptial couch, as a protection to his wife and as a guard of his honour. If on his return home,

he finds an addition to his family, the child is his, bears his name, is accepted as legitimate. No one makes any invidious remarks ; a miracle has been wrought, that is all.

I could not help feeling that it was rather absurd after this to make such a fuss about the admission of a woman, even if a Rûmi, to a Mozabite home, so I resolved on a bold step. One day I watched and waited till I saw one of the bundles of wraps I knew to be a M'zabiya going along in a narrow alley. The bundle, as if suspecting my design, fled tremblingly before me, sliding against the white walls as if entreating those walls to swallow her up and protect her, as she tried to efface herself against them. But I had the advantage over her in my unfettered movements. I caught her up, this " Faffa " or " Mamma," and I touched her with my finger. She uttered a cry of distress. I made the usual polite remark in local use, "How beautiful thou art!" at which she seemed to shudder. Then I tried, very gently of course, to draw aside her veil and I received a staggering blow, which took away all wish to persevere. After this she ran away and disappeared round a corner of the street, whilst I debated in my mind how I should achieve my object by less violent means.

I resolved to go and see the Caïd of Ghardaya whom I already knew, for that worthy functionary was the one whose strained ankle had prevented

him from going with me to the mosque. There is nothing more convenient in the Wâdy M'zab than a strain; it gets better or worse just as occasion demands. I found him installed in his administrative office a long way from his private residence, but to my questions about the Mozabite women, he answered never a word. However, he offered to escort me to the chief oasis. His strained ankle was better, much better, he could ride quite well to-day.

So we started together for the lovely gardens of the oasis, where the plaintive noise made by the pulleys of the wells—resembling the long-drawn-out notes of birds—never ceases day or night. It was spring time, and the trunks of the sturdy palms were draped with creeping vines, whilst beneath the shade of their spreading branches grew numbers of apricot trees, then in full flower, shedding the pink petals of their blossoms in the breeze.

I again spoke to the Caïd about the women, and he replied with remarks on dykes and water channels. He assured me that if all the inhabitants of the Wâdy M'zab were to be wrapt in an enchanted sleep for two months, there would be no Wâdy M'zab when they awoke. It would be dried up, done with—lost for ever! Everything here is artificial. To human ingenuity is due every scrap of vegetation, for it is the hand of

man alone, doling out water drop by drop, which gives to the torrid sand a temporary fertility.

"You see the shady spot over there," said my guide. "Well, our families come out here to live in those little houses, or, rather, to cook in them,



for they live and sleep, even the richest of them, out of doors under the trees."

I began to question my companion again about the women. Did they and the young girls come out here, too? But, alas! the Caïd began to dwell on the value of a palm tree, which requires some forty years of care to attain its full development. Suddenly, however, he fell into the trap, walking into it unconsciously, or, it may be, with his eyes open, for at last he began

on the subject of which my mind was full by saying :

“ We are obliged to have gardens in order to be able to marry our sons. For the first question the father of a girl asks is, ‘ Has he got a good garden to give me as a dowry ? ’ ”

I caught the ball at the rebound. “ Why,” I enquired, “ do you marry your daughters so young ? I do not think that Allah has ordained the sacrifice of mere children of eight or nine years old.”

He protested that such things do not happen now ; girls are not married till they are fourteen. When, however, I expressed my scepticism, he did not press the point, and I fancy he guessed that I was well informed. The fact is, the Caïds shut their eyes to the evil, and allow local cadis to take refuge beneath the ægis of the law when such abuses are committed.

“ It is all for the best,” remarked my guide. “ Good dowries are easily lost if you do not make haste to secure them.” And then he branched off into confidences about such things as the way the women dress their hair in these parts. Unmarried girls, he told me, gather their hair into three very symmetrical little chignons, one at the back of the head, and one above each ear, but marriage changes all that, for the matrons wear one huge chignon very low in the neck,

something in the Japanese style. On fête days, however, some of the hair is piled up above the forehead, and two long locks droop on either side of the face.

“All the hair, you know, is well combed out, and kept very clean.”

Truth to tell, I did not at the time understand all the explanations given me by the worthy Caïd, and it was not until some time later that I verified his description of the fashionable coiffure of the Mozabite women.

“Is it true, Caïd,” I asked presently, “that your women never receive anybody?”

At this point-blank question he poured out a volley of words, of which I could only distinguish a few, such as “no instructions—I don’t know—very unfortunate,” and so on.

“But, Caïd, I am a friend, you know. You will take me to see your wife, will you not?”

He turned pale; he was evidently annoyed, and when I repeated my request, he said:

“No, no; it really is impossible. Do you think I would refuse anything to you that I could grant? My wife would weep, and you would only feel uncomfortable.”

Back again at the office, the Caïd gave me some excellent coffee to drink, and also presented me with a big box of sweetmeats; but nothing would induce him to alter his determination.

"No, no; with my wife or any other woman at Ghardaya, you would only find it very dull."

The afternoon of the next day found me in the reception-room of a third Caïd—that of Ben-Izguen—amongst piles of stuffs, rusty weapons, baskets, chests, etc. I had not the slightest hope of obtaining what I wanted here. In this dissolute town of rigidly virtuous aspect, hostile, too, as it was to the Rûmis, how could I expect that barriers and obstacles would be removed to please me?

No, I had no hope! I was fresh from my wanderings in the mysterious-looking streets, reminding me of the Carthage of olden times, with the fortress-like houses, the doors barred with iron, the footways raised about a foot and a half above the ground. But this modern Carthage was a Carthage in the desert, a bigoted Mussulman Carthage, where the merchants of sweet-smelling spices are not privileged to indulge in the "infamous customs," described by Flaubert. The worship of Allah combined with a certain memory of that of Tanith, produces a curious mixture, and the traditional little bastion to each house, supposed to have been originally built by the angels to protect pious Mozabites from intrusion, is the only thing to distinguish Ben-Izguen from Ghardaya, and even that gives one the impression of an anachronism.

But to return to my Caïd. Presently I saw him bring forth from a chest a wonderful collection of tinsel finery, a perfect tangle of many-coloured ribbons. He placed the whole pile in front of me, and I made out several decorations, amongst which I recognized the well-known Academic palms.

Evidently my Caïd was ambitious. Did he



aspire to the honour of wearing the red ribbon? I wondered. Shall I be very much blamed for turning to account his mistaken ideas of my influence with the home authorities? Without the slightest hesitation I said to him:

“I should like to see your wife, oh Caïd!”

He gave me a searching look, shook his head, and then disappeared into the *heurm*, or harem.

What was going on, I wondered, behind those walls? What orders was the master issuing—what severe instructions? Anyhow, a quarter of an hour later, I had been ushered into the sacred place, in other words, into a semi-covered-in court of considerable size, a kind of atrium, to which air and light are admitted by means of a large bay window, open to the blue sky of heaven.

There she stood, the wife of the Caïd, between her daughter-in-law and her sister-in-law, embarrassed but smiling, stretching out her bare arms, loaded with bracelets, towards me. A veil embroidered with a floral design of many colours, fell from the fichu which served her as head covering, and was worn low on the forehead and fastened behind. A quantity of woollen drapery completed the costumes, evidently those of every day of the three women, indigo blue for the wife, dark red for her daughter, and dark green for her sister. This drapery was arranged about their well-formed, robust-looking figures, in wide folds, leaving the neck and shoulders, which were of gleaming whiteness, quite bare; I never saw such milk-white complexions anywhere else, except amongst the women of Sweden, as those of these Mozabites. The effect was heightened by the ebony of the hair and the jet of the eyes.

“Enti zina.” “Thou art beautiful,” I said to

each of the three in Arabic, for I did not know a word of their language, and they smiled at me in a contented way. Then they squeezed my hands and embraced me, pressing me against their breasts, in spite of all the formidable pins they wore, which were not unlike stilettoes. I felt rather as if I were being caressed by amiable panthers, and I should not have been sorry to have had some sure protector beside me, if only my little servant Miloud, who had been turned back at the door with gestures of horror at the idea of his coming in.

"Thou art amiable, thy house is beautiful, may Allah reward thee for thy kind welcome," I went on, but they did not understand me. They only stared at me in an inquiring way, with eyes in which I saw a dawning distress.

The Caïd began to laugh, and I said to him: "But, Caïd, they understood what I said just now well enough," to which that profound psychologist replied in a peremptory tone, as he pointed a very fat finger upwards: "A woman always understands when she is told she is beautiful."

Then the women, who were not yet spoiled by the stoutness of middle age, placed their superb arms about my waist, and led me round the hall or atrium. In the middle of one of the walls, I noticed a strange-looking stove, a

furnace in fact, used for washing, as well as cooking, judging by the gutters for carrying off water. In any museum it would be taken for an altar of human sacrifice. The many-coloured decorations of the walls, the quaint-looking vases, etc., were all quite unlike anything I had seen amongst the Arabs, and there was about everything a barbaric sumptuousness, a reserved dignity, so to speak, which I found very impressive.

"But come!" cried the Caïd, and it was, alas! outside I had to come, for in his opinion my visit had lasted long enough. He cut short the gestures of farewell of the women; he was evidently nervous and a little uneasy.

"Do your women never go out, then?" I asked. "Do they not find it dull during your long absences?"

"Why should they find it dull?" he replied. "They guard their virtue even as Khadija did."

The reader will remember who Khadija was: the first wife of the Prophet, the venerable Mother of the Faithful (*Ummu—Muminin*), the wealthy old female merchant, whom Mahomet so completely wheedled, and whom he left at home when he went to trade in Syria, Mesopotamia, or even as far away as Persia. Khadija believed blindly in his mission, even in his famous journey to Heaven.

To follow the example of Khadija! That means to say, the Mozabite women are to be content to remain alone for two years or more, whenever the exigencies of money-making require it. Admire your husband, believe all he tells you, however improbable and absurd it may be, that is the advice given to the Mozabite wife who, moreover, must wear mourning, nothing but black, and lay aside all her ornaments, during her lord's interminable absences. The only consolations and distractions she has are those of the shirt, already described, and the dances of her negress servants. They are dull, these poor women, whatever the Caïd of Ben-Izguen may say to the contrary. They are dull, though they live in fairly big towns, for they are not allowed to go beyond the narrow limits of their houses, they never get any change of scene whatever. Their beautiful limbs are enchained by the most rigid superstitions, they are a prey to the most harrowing nervous tremors. They are afraid of mere shadows, and they are consumed with ennui ; as a result, hysteria is rife amongst them, and it is no rare thing for one of them to go out of her mind.

When the husband comes back the whole household brightens up, and a regular fête is held in his honour. His arrival with his purse well filled, and his baggage full of presents for his women, is indeed cause for rejoicing. No more black



A MOZABITE WOMAN

garments, no more melancholy looks! Out of the chest come the huge jewels, the costly, but heavy barbaric ornaments. The negresses give themselves up to the preparations for feasting on a grand scale: a camel is roasted, whole sheep are boiled and served with rice, all manner of cakes mixed with oil are turned out, all to testify to the joy which the presence of the master causes—or ought to cause in the home.

There is one very pretty custom connected with the return of the long-absent husband. The happy wife bids all the poor and beggars of the place to a feast, which is given in the cemetery, where all meet together. The hostess and her servants bring out great dishes of kouskous, meat, rice and bread, with big pitchers of water. Then, on the Tomb of her dead parents, the wife dispenses all these good things, which she calls alms, and after the meal, the pots and dishes from which it was served, are broken to the accompaniment of weeping and prayer. Amongst the piles of pieces of crockery on the tombs, a few provisions are left for the spirits of the departed—supposed to be always wandering near these homes of the dead.

“Do not persecute us, but rejoice with us in our happiness! May Allah keep you in peace and health!”

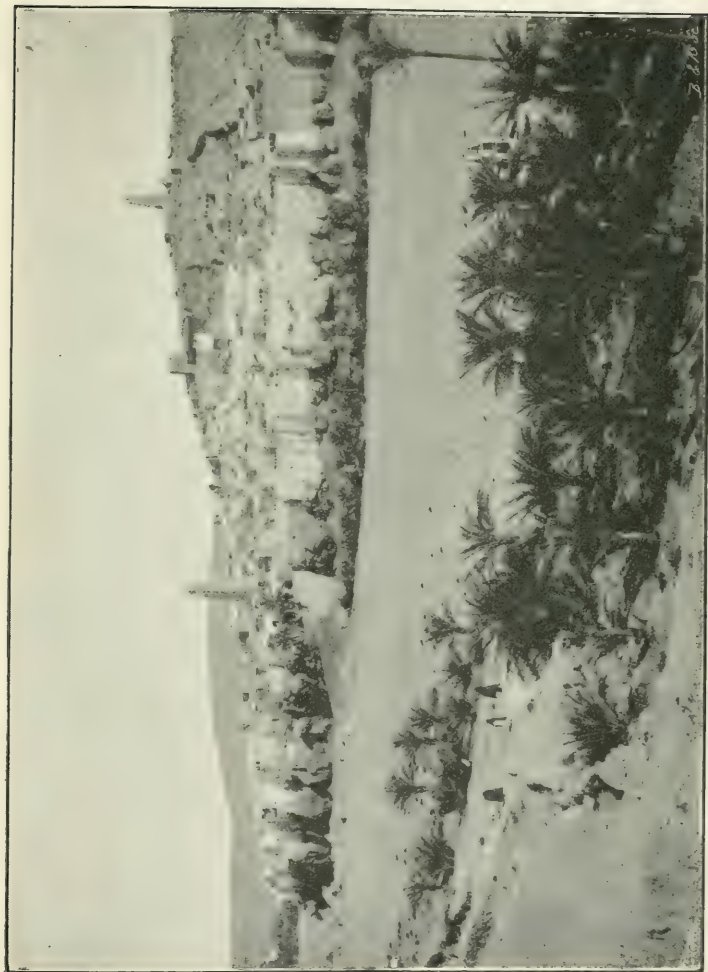
Of course, I did not find out all this about the

manners and customs of the Mozabite women in my twenty minutes' interview with the wife and sister of the Caïd of Ben-Izguen. Emboldened by my first experience, and shutting my eyes to the fact that it was exceptional, I managed to gain admission to the women's quarter in several other houses. I went on knocking at the barred entrances, bristling though they were with iron, until at last they were opened to me. I slipped in behind the jealously-guarded and half-opened door, taking no notice of hostile or forbidding looks; and in the end I recognized the wisdom of the Caïd of Ghardaya, when he said to me in the oasis, "You would only find it dull."

Everywhere the reception I met with was anything but pleasant. Several times, indeed, the hostility became active, and I was turned out bodily. In one or two instances I was even in danger.

But I had my reasons for persevering in my efforts, unwelcome though they were. Was I to be content to learn nothing about these Mozabite women, when I had become quite familiar with the rest of their sisters of the Sahara? No, indeed! So I went on, still interested but sad at heart, so very depressing was the hatred I met with on every side, the effect of which was like that of the ice and fog of winter, penetrating to the very joints and marrow.

For all that, however, what poetic pictures I



THE TOWN OF BOU-NOURA, WÂDY M'ZAR.

carried away in my memory. One family I remember especially, whom I visited in the twilight. There they were, all gathered together in the atrium, the pungent smoke from the juniper wood burning in the grate rising up to the blue patch of open sky above. Father, mother, several children, including the little *fiancée* of one of them, all putting a great restraint on themselves, holding themselves perfectly rigid, in fact, in their struggle to resist the desire to throw me out into the street. Their silence, their clenched fists, their mute attitudes of defiance, gave to them the fierce beauty of the conquered in the presence of the victorious enemy. Then in another house, a fine large residence, there was a camel in the ante-chamber, stretching out its long shaggy neck in the style of early sacred pictures, and, crouching on the hearth within, bending over a little child, was a woman past early youth, but still beautiful, and pathetic-looking. With a cold, dignified, almost aggressive simplicity, she raised seven of her fingers and uttered the Arab word, *maout* (dead). And her negress servant, as she escorted me out, thought it necessary to translate and comment upon that one word, for she remarked laconically and confidentially: *Morto, sebba mutchatchu fini morto!* One of my sister Rûmiyas, in fact, one of the sisters under Cardinal Lavigèrie, had caused all the trouble by wanting to wash one

of the children. The touch of water the Mozabite women think is fatal to little ones, and this one touch had been enough to kill six others who had been brought within the contagion.

Then I often think of a little Mozabite with small delicately-moulded limbs who had already been married for four years, and was soon to become a mother, yet carried her burden with an ease and grace which were almost æsthetic, and are quite unknown to women disfigured by hard work and corsets. I don't know whether her husband was absent or at home just then, but I shall never forget her pretty attitude as she stood gently driving away the doves which kept coming to perch on her head and on her bare shoulders. This charming little woman was the only Mozabitya who did not tremble at my approach.

"Oh, Allah, what shall we do?" she cried. "Here is the Rûmiya coming into the house!"

But she showed no ill temper about the tiring purifications she would have to see to after I was gone, to wash away the profanation caused by my Christian footsteps.

A less pleasant episode occurred when I intruded on an assembly of women on the second day of a marriage fête. Whether they were excited by the games and dancing which had been going on, I do not know, but they behaved in a brutal way to me, and drove me out ignominiously. I took refuge on

the terrace, where they dared not follow me, for fear they should be seen in my contaminating presence. I looked down in fear and trembling from my point of vantage, thinking how ugly their angry faces were as they gnashed their teeth at me. Loaded with the tinsel finery of their gala array, their cheeks painted white, red and gold, the tips of their noses and their



chins touched with pitch, of all things in the world to use as an ornament, badly curled locks of hair falling along the sides of the temples, and heavy jewels here, there and everywhere, their appearance was certainly anything but attractive. Whereas the simple fichus and massive ornaments of their everyday costumes make them look like demure saints about to emerge from their shrines.

As will be understood at once, I could not take

up my abode for good in the niches or in the pigeon holes on the terrace. I had to get down again somehow, and when I set about doing so a terrible scene ensued. The bride of nine years old began to cry, the chief bridesmaid to scream! some little wives married the previous year, one eight, the other ten years old—oh, Caïd of Ghardaya, what did you tell me?—yelled till they were out of breath. Then the rest of the women, the adults, flung themselves upon me, beating me, pushing me about, scratching me, and even pulling out a lock of my hair. Did they want to keep it as a souvenir, I wonder? As for me, my recollection of them is anything but affectionate or grateful. The scene is still a nightmare to me, the one nightmare of my journey. Later, when the night-wind swept as was its wont across the desert, I fancied that I heard in my sleep the clamouring of the Mozabite women, and that their malignant hands were shaking my tent as if it were an old plum tree.

“Oh, Allah! oh, Allah!” I seemed to hear them cry, “here is the Rûmiya coming into the house!”

CHAPTER IX.

NEGRESS SLAVES.

“MADAME, would you not like to buy a pretty negress? I know of one for sale, whom you can have for a hundred douros.”*

That is a question which was actually put to me during my recent visit to the Algerian Sahara. I must, however, hasten to add that there is really nothing revolting in the survival of a custom we Europeans consider barbarous. Slaves are never treated in this land of patriarchal manners with the harshness and cruelty which led to so much weeping over the Uncle Toms of the New World. The life of the negroes of the Sahara, in the Wâdy M'zab and at El Aghuat, is that so well described by Bernardin de Saint Pierre, in his “Paul et Virginie.” Marie and Domingue, the good servants who were so devoted to their mistresses, who spoiled Paul, adored Virginie, and were looked upon in return as members of the family, were really, to all intents

* A douro is worth about four shillings and fourpence in English money.—TRANS.

and purposes slaves, the actual property of those to whom they gave themselves up so entirely and so willingly.

When the decree for the abolition of slavery was promulgated in Southern Algeria, there was consternation amongst the masters, and grief amongst the negroes. The former enquired what crime there could be in feeding, clothing, and in return receiving easy service from those who, in their own land, would probably have been eaten by their stronger fellow countrymen, or would, if they escaped that fate, have succumbed to the privations and persecution to which they were subjected. The slaves, finding themselves alone in the desert free, really free, but without *kouskous*, without clothes, with no object in life, no one to love, or to love them, were in despair. For almost always, when a dog loses his master, it is the dog who grieves the most ; at least, this is how it is with country dogs ; I can't answer for those who have been perverted by living in a town !

The Arab offices now became thronged with weeping negroes, for the masters, afraid of disobeying, conformed at first to the new regulations, and, with the sorrow of death in their souls, turned away the companions of their wandering lives in the desert, and the guardians of their hearths. When caravans from a distance arrived, white and black men wept together

over an evil for which there seemed to be no remedy.

“Who will help us with the work of irrigation? Who will take care of our children? Who will help our women in the house?” sighed the masters.

And the answer was :

“Keep your negroes as free servants, and pay them salaries.”

To which one and all replied : “But if we have no money?” Whilst the slaves on their side urged : “What shall we do with money? And if our masters die, what will become of us supposing their heirs do not want to keep us?”

So it went on ; murmuring and complaining on every side. And the civil and military establishments were full of weeping negroes, and everyone wondered how it would all end.

In the course of a few years things settled down. Besides the negroes who came as emigrants to settle at Ghardaya or El Aghuat, who are perfectly free, and were established there long before the French occupation, there are three classes of blacks in the Sahara ; those who are treated like European servants, those who are nominally in receipt of wages—which are never paid—and those who have been made slaves in the good old-fashioned way, and whom the French leave in the condition in which they found them, a tolerant proceeding for

which I, for one, do not blame them. The first comers amongst the negroes, the original emigrants alluded to above, live in colonies under the control of a Caïd of their own. Their social organization is a system of mutual help, the women do the washing, etc., the men go out as gardeners by the day.

The two classes of negroes who are practically the property of their masters, that is to say, those who never receive the wages they are nominally entitled to, and the actual slaves, now live exactly as they did before the time of the abolition decree. It is only the first of the three groups, those who are actually paid wages, who are really unhappy at the present time. With his wages the negro buys wine and raw spirits. He gets drunk, and loses his situation. Then he sinks into poverty and misery, and his one ambition is to find a good place as a slave or *oucif*. But this he rarely succeeds in doing, and charity alone, that virtue so much in repute amongst the Arabs, saves him from dying of hunger.

The word *oucif* signifies in the Sahara either negro or slave, for the two things were identical in the old days when the dialect now in use was evolved. Most of the *oucifs* were born in the houses of the parents of their masters, but there are certain alien elements amongst them, for there is a constant influx of negroes from the Soudan,

whose numbers are augmented by the gifts of slaves received by the great Arab merchants from the pious Mussulman population on the Niger.

Very significant of how things were with them in their hot country are some of the stories told about these slaves from the Niger. A little girl who had not long been owned by a certain Arab Caïd, and had been lent by him to the wife of a French officer, ran away from her comfortable situation at the end of a week, and threw herself at the feet of her real owner, her features haggard and convulsed, her whole form trembling with terror. "Oh, Caïd! Oh, my father!" she cried, "take me away from those people." The Caïd at once jumped to the conclusion that the child had been cruelly ill-treated, but at last, between her sobs, she managed to explain the cause of her frantic despair: "Oh, take me away," she gasped; "they give me too much food to eat!" The astonishment of the Caïd can be imagined, and five notes of interrogation alone could do justice to his expression at hearing such a complaint. Good food naturally seemed to him a gift from Allah to be thankfully accepted, but at last, after much questioning, he elicited from the little negress the explanation: "Oh, Caïd, dost thou not understand that they are fattening me up to eat me?"

I really do not know which is the more important in the Sahara, the negro or the negress. The

latter is often a great favourite with her master, it is true, but the former is quite indispensable to him, and is entrusted with many a confidential mission. The devotion of both is absolutely unlimited; they are as faithful as dogs to their owners. They have none of the laziness with which the blacks are so often charged. Then they are such sympathetic creatures, and so easily contented, these worthy negroes of the Sahara! A very good and typical specimen is the old coffee roaster, Barka, who is eighty-seven years old, and whose philosophy is summed up in the brief sentence, "a good sou to buy tobacco and a good wife." Moreover, which is certainly very unlike what we have to put up with at home nowadays, young negro servants are as devoted as old ones, although, as is natural, their wisdom and experience are less than those of their predecessors. In all well-to-do families they are to be met with, and they are treated as children of the house. One young negro told me that his mistress had herself fed him from the breast when he was a baby, a very significant proof of the affection between mistress and servant. Indeed, the great kindness shewn by the women of the big tents to their negresses is one of the most pleasing characteristics of the quiet, secluded life they lead, shewing that their instincts are certainly by no means bad if they cannot, perhaps, always be called altogether good.



OLD BARKA.

It will be understood from all that I have said that in the Wâdy M'zab, annexed but a short time ago, slavery still exists, under a thin disguise. The slaves, in fact, play a very important part amongst the Mozabites. What would the gardens be like without the negroes? What would become of the Mozabite ladies without the negresses? At every turn in the streets you meet the latter, distinguishable by their blue draperies, hurrying about on their errands. They are alike musicians, singers, soothsayers, confidantes and accomplices. They are better than mere messengers, better than the best couriers, for they bring a little fresh air into the jealously-guarded harem, and, thanks to them, news does sometimes penetrate behind the strongly-barred doors. They represent all the life, the brightness and the activity of the gloomy interiors in which the women of the Sahara pass their lives, and their dancing and singing are the sole distractions of the evenings.

The greatest indulgence is always shewn to the negresses and their husbands, for they all marry or form more or less legal unions. Presents are given to them, and they are even allowed to celebrate in their masters' houses the heathen fêtes they still keep up, in spite of their conversion to Mohammedanism. Truly there is something very charming about the religious ceremonies of these negro slaves, invocations, sacrifices, super-

stitions, mad dervish-like antics and all. Long may the good fellows amuse themselves, in their innocent way, for in the pious and hypocritical Wâdy M'zab, where never a trill of song is allowed to pass the lips of the native woman, where not a note of music is ever permitted to profane the air, except in the places—let them be accursed!—protected by the wicked Rûmis, the tinkling of the castanets and the *ron ron* of the *tam-tams* or cymbals of the negroes goes on all night.

“The joy of the slave,” says the proverb, “is as a crown to the brow of his master.”

Yes, negresses of Ghardaya, Ben-Izguen and El-Ateuf, it is with beautiful arms and supple movements, and smiles showing your gleaming white teeth, that you place that crown of joy upon the heads of your masters !

CHAPTER X.

THE QUEST FOR WATER AMONGST THE
NOMAD ARABS.

BUT it is time for us to leave the Wâdy M'zab. I have compared it to an islet, alone in the vast expanse of waters. Truly this was a just comparison, for the sandy districts surrounding it—the forbidding Chebka, the Shaânba Sahara, and the dreary Wâdy N'ssa differ less from the smiling districts occupied by the Mozabites, than do the poverty-stricken nomads from the wealthy heretic merchants.

It is the nomads of the Sahara, whether they be mercenaries of the Mozabites or not, who seem to me to be the real inhabitants of the far-stretching arid wastes, which have their own magic and pathetic beauty.

There is nothing particularly captivating or sublime about any one of these inhabitants, taken singly. It is, in fact, the environment which supplies the charm, and never did I see the human being harmonize more entirely with the frame in

which he is set, than does the nomad of the desert. Never elsewhere did I more fully realize the insignificance of man as compared with nature ; for that great passing dream called life is like the dust driven by the wind, the accumulated grains of which make up the Desert.

I loved them, then, these children of the Sahara,



even as one loves the rocks of the mountains or the blast of the storm, and their memory abides with me much as does that of certain of the brute creation, which appeal to us in a language of which they themselves have no suspicion. The appearance, the customs, the modes of thought, of the nomads were a revelation to

me of the force of the elements in their native land, and also brought home to me the wonderful truthfulness of the descriptions in the writings of the ancients, which are so instinct with that feeling of awe inspired by the reality. Yea, I have greeted thee, oh Earth, which crumbles away and engulfs us ; Wind, which rends the rocks and effaces the dunes ; Fire, which burns and destroys ; Water, without which all life perishes !

Divine water, with which "Allah," says the Koran (Surâh xvi. verse 69), "the all-merciful, resuscitates the earth when it is dead." Men bless it and women sing its praises, for truly it is a supernatural gift. Water, divine water, dominates the existence of these people ; nearly all their time is passed in seeking it.

How can we camp, how can we settle down, without water ? they say ; how can we build our storehouses and our *gurbis* (huts) ? Whether nomad or sedentary, the dwellers in the desert must find what they call a *r'dir*, or place where water filters through the sand, or a well already sunk, or they must themselves bore one in the wâdy, which is in the desert what the river is elsewhere.

It seems a strange thing to talk about boring a well in a wâdy, or river, but it must be remembered that a wâdy, strictly speaking, is the channel of a watercourse that is dry, except every

two or three years, after a storm, when the water rushes tumultuously along, flecked with foam, like the waves of the sea. As a rule, the course of the rivers of the Sahara is subterranean, and by digging a few feet into the sand choking up the bed, a yellow brackish liquid is found. This water, never very abundant, quickly corrodes and absorbs the walls of the well sunk to obtain it, so that it soon becomes more and more like mortar.

Do not cry out in disgust. The people of the Sahara drink this water with eager enjoyment and gratitude. You would drink it too, if your thirst were as great as theirs. Yes, you would drink it with intense delight, even after it had become tainted and stale by being carried for two or three days in skins in the hot sun !

In other districts, where there are no wādys or underground rivers, deeper wells are sunk, and a little water of a very inferior character is obtained, the wells being constructed of good masonry, and taken care of by a guardian or keeper, who is sometimes also the owner. A few palm trees are planted about these wells and are watered by hand. Just imagine what the life of the wife of this guardian, or of the wives of his sons, must be, tied down to this port in the ocean of sand, condemned to the isolation of the Desert, with absolutely no hope of change. How often must

they be torn by conflicting emotions—pride in the ownership of their well, and pity for those who drag themselves to it in the hope of a drink. Their husbands often repeat to them fragments of the old Malekite code, by which the



torrid South was ruled before the arrival of the Mussulmans:—

“Article 1220.—The master of a well can dispose of it as of water in a vessel belonging to him.

“Article 1221.—Nevertheless, he is bound to give to drink gratuitously to him who is in danger

of perishing of thirst, and to others in return for payment.

“Article 1223.—But whosoever shall have dug a well in the dead districts of the Sahara (this is the great bone of contention—where do the cultivated districts end and the dead ones begin?) shall be bound to let all use the water without payment, in the following prescribed order.

“Article 1224.—First of all the traveller may drink, and the bucket for drawing up the water shall be lent to him; after him the inhabitant of the district shall drink; then the animals or the flocks of the owner of the well; each one in his turn can drink of the water, but in case of urgency let him who is in danger drink first!”

Ah, danger! That is the word, the one most important thing which binds together all the wanderers in the Desert. I remember one broiling day when we missed one of the subalterns of our escort, a silly young fellow named Tahar. We had exhausted our supply of water, but for all that the *sokrhars* and guides all declared that they would wait on those burning dunes, where it was as hot as in an oven, until Tahar was found. To go in search of him would only be to lessen his chance of joining them again. We should all drink, or nobody should! The anxiety of all

these good comrades was immense, although Tahar was neither the friend nor the relation of any of them. At last the camel drivers who had been sent to hunt for him came back, bringing the truant with them, who had hurt his leg and could only limp along. Well might we have quoted the proverb: "Make sure of your travelling companion even before you make sure of the way."

Sometimes this much-prized water, comes in greater quantities than you care about; there is no such thing as moderation in hot climates. At such times the lower parts of the plain are converted into a lake, with angry, tossing waves, which rush along, carrying tents, animals and men with them.

The French soldiers were more than once surprised in this way in some wâdy they had not suspected of being a river in disguise, and several dozens of them met their deaths by drowning. The natives, warned by experience, are more careful, and choose the higher ground for their encampments; but even they do not always escape; as witness the disaster which, some fifteen years ago, overtook the dawar of the M'Khaliffs at a little distance from El-Aghuat, which was carried away bodily, leaving no trace behind it but a heap of corpses, the camels being all killed, as well as the women and children. But

it was Maktûb, or fate, said the survivors, and they thought no more about it. Does a banker keep on dwelling on the accidents which take place in his gold mines? Water is wealth, it is a sevenfold sacred thing and every mother teaches her children to use it sparingly and to hold it in reverent honour.

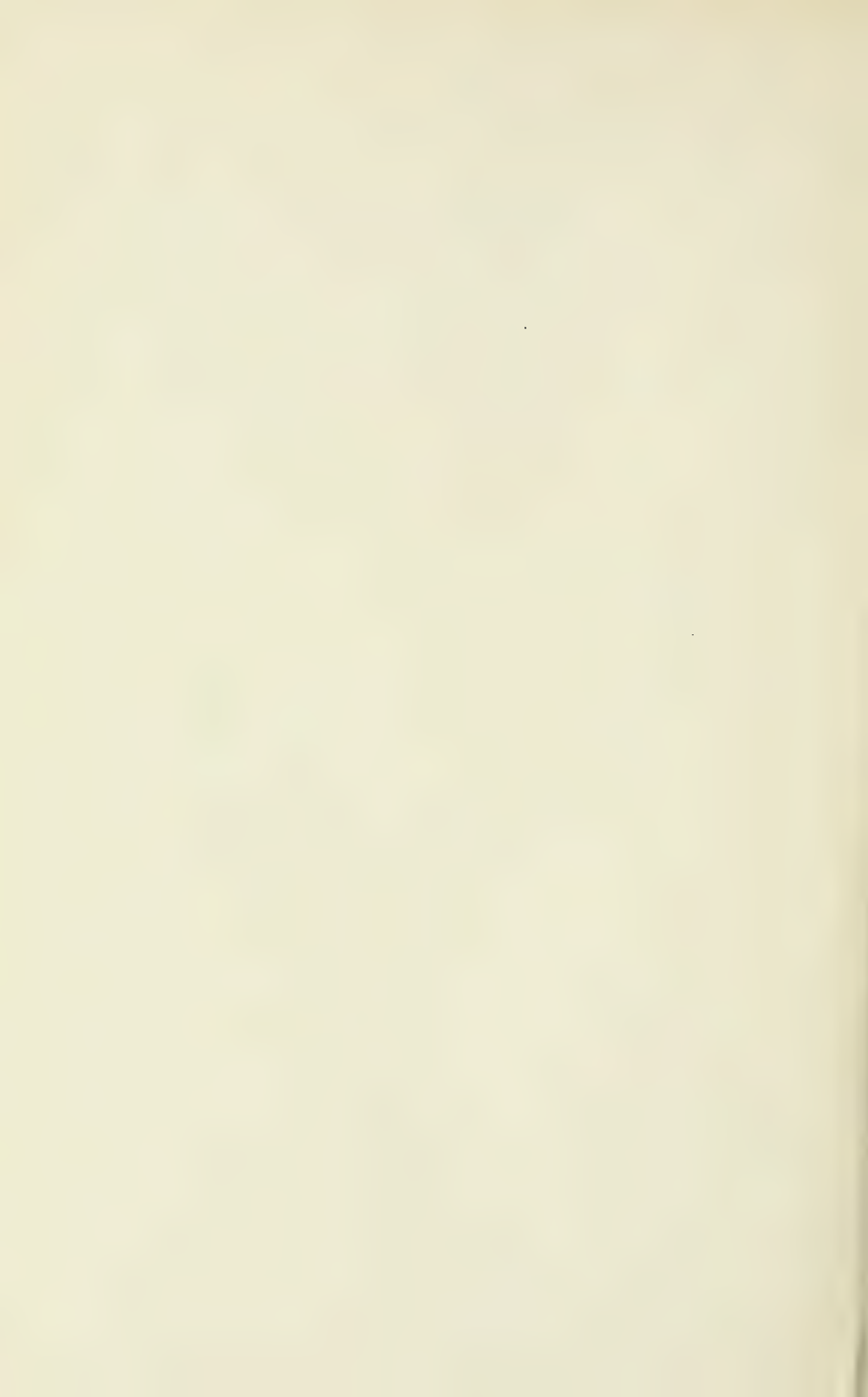
“Throw no water away until thou hast found



water,” she says. “On the feet of the horse of thy father, or of the Caïd, alone shalt thou pour water.”

When a child is leaving home, either to go with a caravan or to stay with some influential relations, the women who are to be left behind make him drink as a stirrup cup a bowl of water drawn especially for him from the nearest well. This

water will act as a charm to bind him to the house or the tent of his fathers. "We shall not lose him," they say, "he has drunk the water;" the water, the short soft easy Arab name of which was the first to be stammered by his baby lips: "*Ma-el-Ma!*"



CHAPTER XI.

ABOUT BIRTH AND MARRIAGE AMONGST THE
ARAB TRIBES.

WHEN a daughter is born in the tent of a dawar of the Arabs of the Sahara, there is no feasting or rejoicing. On the contrary, the event is passed over in silence, just as some slur on the family name would be. The father declines to look upon his progeny, and sometimes repudiates his wife for "giving him no children." For a girl is not looked upon as a child; she is just a girl, and the contemporaries of Mohammed would have thought no more of burying her alive than Europeans do of drowning troublesome kittens. Mohammed himself says, or, rather, Allah says, for the Prophet's words were inspired: "Will you attribute to God as a child with a soul the being which grows up decked in ornaments and finery, and always insists upon disputing without reason?"

It is very much the same amongst the sedentary tribes. Only they are less natural about it, and hide their disappointment at the birth of a girl

better. Tolba—that being the plural for Taleb, or a man learned in the Koran and all sacred things—are invited to come and recite prayers, and the women who live near the mother hasten, one after the other, to see her during the nine days of her retirement. They console her by reminding her of the many heroines revered by the Mussulman religion, such as Khadija, the



virtuous wife of the Prophet ; Aisha, his favourite young wife whom he held so sacred. May Allah preserve them all ! To go yet further back, there was the blessed Miriam,* and they appeal to the Koran itself—touching confession of the inferiority of the feeble sex—yet, at the same time, a proof of the glory which may yet occasionally accrue to a woman.

“ Oh, Lord,” they quote, “ all power is in Thy

* Mary, the mother of Jesus.—TRANS.

hands, all good is in Thy hands, for Thou art All-powerful.

“Thou dividest the night from the day and the day from the night, Thou bringest death out of life and life out of death. Thou givest food to whom Thou wilt.

“God chose out from amongst all men Adam and Noah, the family of Abraham, and that of Imran. These families were descended the one from the other, Allah sees and hears all.

“The wife of Imran having then received the promise of a child, prayed: ‘Oh, Lord, I dedicate to Thee that which is in my womb.’ And when she was delivered, she lamented: ‘Oh, Lord, Lord, I have given birth to a girl.’ Allah knew well what she had brought forth, for a boy is not like a girl. ‘I have brought a girl into the world, and I have called her Miriam.’

“Now the Lord had for all that caused her to bring forth a beautiful creature, and Zacharias the priest took care of the child. Every time he visited Miriam he found good food near her. ‘Oh, Miriam,’ he said, ‘whence hast thou this food?’ ‘It comes from God, for God feeds abundantly those whom He will, and does not dole it out bit by bit.’”

According to the commentaries on the Koran, although Zacharias carefully closed the seven gates of the Temple, he always found winter fruit

near Miriam in the summer and summer fruit in the winter.

Touchingly significant of the ideal of a people who know so well what it is to suffer from hunger, is the reference to the delight in the good food supplied to her of Miriam, the gentle virgin who was to conceive, through the overshadowing of the Most High, Him whom the Arabs themselves respectfully speak of as *Sidna Aïssa*, our Lord Jesus Christ.

I have quoted above the passage from the Koran because it is so very characteristic, showing as it does how the wife of Imran, whom we Christians call St. Anne, looked upon the birth of a girl when she had been promised—or thought she had been promised—*a child*, that is to say, a son. And I am reminded in this connection of the anxious face of a young Harazlia nomad whom I saw in his tent, pitched near the walls of Wargla, far away from El Aghuat, the head-quarters of his tribe. Beneath the tattered covering of that tent a woman, or rather a girl of fifteen, in a shabby red garment, was tossing in a feverish sleep. Her only ornaments were some copper bracelets and a little silver brooch, fastened at her breast. Evidently wife and husband were very badly off.

Presently the latter said to me: "I am a poor man; I come here to sell baskets of alfa. I do

not want the *tubib* (doctor) of the French soldiers to come and see my wife, and I have no money to pay for a *taleb* of our own. Give me some medicine (*dua*), then, oh, Rûmiya!"

I enquired: "What is the matter with your wife? Wake her, and let me examine her."

Then he answered me: "There is nothing the



matter with *her*, oh, Rûmiya; why should we wake her if Allah wishes her to sleep? But her unborn child is ill, very ill. Oh, believe me, perhaps he will die! and if it is a child (that is to say, a boy) I do not wish him to die. Oh, Rûmiya, I have no child yet!"

His voice was choked with anguish, and when I looked meaningly at two tiny dirty little girls in tattered maliffas who were playing near, he added,

in a surly voice, "They are only the girls of another wife."

"Are they not yours then?" I enquired.

"Yes, they are mine!" he replied. They were evidently, however, of no account compared to the unknown possible "child," who, according to his father, was in danger of never seeing the light. I must add that there *is* a word for boy in the Arab language, but it is hardly ever used; a child always means a boy, and the expression "I have no child," is as significant in the desert as "I have no son" would be in Europe.

To die without male issue is considered a humiliating misfortune, but to die without any issue at all is still worse, and means the loss of many chances of eternal life.

Touched by the man's distress, I gave him a little bi-carbonate of soda, which could do neither harm nor good. I never found out whether the strange malady from which the unborn child was suffering, was cured, or whether three months after the young wife gave birth to a girl, and in her turn exclaimed piteously, "Oh, Lord, Lord, I have brought a girl into the world." If it were so, no doubt the reception accorded to the new arrival was of the coldest.

No doubt either that the old women of the Harazlia tribe belonging to the same dawar as the

poor little wife secretly brought her the traditional caouah ; they wrapped up the baby girl, smeared her scarcely opened eyelids with *kohl*, manipulated her skull, invoking the name of Allah, and they bestowed on her, with prayer, the name of Khadija, or of Mesauda, meaning the daughter of her father. But it all had to be done mysteriously, with hushed movements, in whispered tones, instead of with the noisy joy with which the birth of a real child, a son, would have been celebrated.

“ My son ! my son, *ouldi ! ouldi !* ”

However, when the first bitterness of disappointment is over, little girls and little boys are brought up in the same manner, equally petted and spoiled by their mothers. Dirty and covered with flies, they are jolted about on her shoulders as she carries them about, or they are left to play with the goats and chickens in the warm soft sand which purifies everything. They are all happy enough, kindly, indeed tenderly, treated by their mothers and grandmothers, and *still more loved by their fathers*. To realise the one great moral beauty of the race, the intense love of childhood, you ought to see an Arab father carrying in his arms a little *mutchatchu* of two years old. If this great love sometimes degenerates into something less—for this torrid climate vitiates even nature—it still remains a fact that it is general, very constant and very

strong. And the father of the girl whose birth he so bitterly deplored, insists on her having, when she is but six months old, plenty of bracelets and earrings, her soft little ankles must be encircled by little *khalkhals*; she must wear a little silk *maharma* on her head, fastened in the middle of



her forehead. The father will sell an extra sheep, and eat a *kouskous* the less, so that his little Khadija may be properly decked out!

I have passed months amongst the Arabs of the Southern districts, I have dwelt with the wild and degraded desert tribes, and I hereby bear witness that I never once saw a child ill treated. Of no country of Europe, not even of France or of England, could such an assertion be made.

So they roll about in the sand, these little men

and women, the girls arranging their finery, the boys galloping on little donkeys; it is delightful, in spite of their ignorance of soap and water, to watch them in their long floating many-coloured garments, through which their supple naked limbs can be distinctly made out. Stains on those garments look like ornaments, rents serve for ventilation. The children, especially where ophthalmia is not so prevalent, may well be called the smile of the desert; they live and enjoy life on scanty diet, milk and dates. They revel in all the freedom of wide-spreading horizons, they have constant change, happy little wild animals that they are, natural and unfettered by convention.

All too soon, the boy becomes the nomad hunter, the warrior, the beast of prey, more cruel than his adult relations, because he has not yet learnt the bitter lessons of experience; the little girl remains naïve, arch, affected, very feminine, with something, in spite of brown skin, nudity and dirt, of the solemn gravity of Kate Greenaway's children. On fête days especially, in all her ornaments and with her new snow-white veil on, this resemblance of expression comes out in spite of the great difference of costume.

Yes, childish haughtiness and quaint gravity are the predominating characteristics of the Arab maidens. I see them, as I write, those little Mesaudas, Fatmas, or Zuinas, etc., whom I

used to meet on my way to and fro, looking at me with their big eyes, but anxious not to appear inquisitive. I remember the stiff dignity with which they made their brief answers to my questions, and their efforts to disguise the joy the gift of a pin or a French sweetmeat gave them. Their affected indifference, which was so amusing, seemed to me to be really much greater than that of the girls belonging to the sedentary tribes, my little friends, Zorah, Hauli, Fatma, Graira, Arrifa, and above all, the important four-year-old Kerah, who was so protectively condescending to the three-year-old Aisha-S'rira. These maidens, of the village or the town, know what good manners are, and exactly where to draw the line between the reserve demanded by convention and the interest required by courtesy. They fluttered about my room—or what served me as a room—like little doves, silently opening my boxes to peep into them, or examining my toilette utensils, or they would linger about the fire, for the evenings and mornings in the Sahara are so fresh that a fire is necessary in spite of the great heat of the day. This fire is lit either in the *dar* or house, in the street just outside it, or on the threshold of the tent. If the fire were in-doors, my visitors would squat down on the *fréchias* or soft woollen mats, watching the sparks with one eye and my slightest movement

with the other. Happy hours they were, peaceful hours we spent together, after their early arrival in the morning, with their formal greetings, their mouths full of honeyed words, their hands full of presents, such as a white pigeon with shrivelled claws, a basket of dates, an orange the leader of some caravan had given them, all pretty disinterested little attentions, amounting indeed almost to homage done to the Rûmiya, whom the Sidi their father had ordered them to honour.

Little by little my young guests, whether they belonged to the sedentary or the nomad tribes, revealed to me the gradual development of the Saharian character. Dear little birds of the Desert, solemn little parrots that they were, each replying mechanically to my question :

“ Wilt thou return to-morrow ? ”

“ Yes, if it please Allah ! ”

Not one of them was ever guilty of a slip, even the Baby Aisha-S'rira when tossed up in the air in my arms never winced, but the instant the door was shut, or I went away for a minute, what a hubbub there was, what shouts of merry laughter, what a rapid exchange of opinions, exclamations of wonder and admiration, now that they were no longer constrained to moderation by courtesy or by my august presence !

In the Sahara you must be at least fifteen years old for it to be permissible to laugh before anyone.

To be serious is everything. The greatest compliment one Arab mother can pay to another, about some little Fatma of eight years old, is "Thank Allah, who has saved her from ever laughing!"

But they make up for all this enforced solemnity when they are alone with their intimate friends, and no mistake.

At about ten or eleven years old, the little Arab girl begins to assume the important airs and graces of a woman. She is not yet very fully developed, and she is not very intelligent, but she observes that the old women of the *dawar* have to do all the household work. She sees them carrying the children about, furling and unfurling the tents, following the caravan on foot, with heavy bundles on their shoulders, when the family moves from one place to another, whilst the young women lounge lazily in the *bassur* or big palanquin, covered with fringed drapery, and perched upon the hump of the finest of the camels. She knows full well the value of the life just about to begin for her. She will have a husband, and a dowry will be given to her. She will receive the most beautiful jewels, and a veil spangled with gold. The guns will be fired in her honour on her wedding day. She will be the mistress of the tent during the many absences of her husband.

She feels all this instinctively, the future

downfall from her high estate, though she is scarcely conscious of it, really adding piquancy to her anticipations of the glory awaiting her. She is not afraid of the conjugal tyranny she has heard about. She knows that the Arab husbands very seldom strike their wives hard enough to hurt them, unless they are in fault. Her beauty and her



tact, she feels certain, will make her husband kind to her and secure her happiness. You may be very sure that she has already noted and exaggerated the effect of her dark eyes and graceful movements on the men of the dawar, for the women of the nomad tribes are allowed to go about the dawar without veils. Indeed, most of them own no veils, which prevents them from venturing into towns. As they cannot wear veils they

hide themselves altogether from any but their own people.

All the admiring glances she has seen, all that she knows of the happy triumphs of her friends who have become brides, give the maiden of the dawat something of the scornful pride, the self-absorbed egotism, of a young queen.

She will enjoy one brief season of bloom, all too brief, indeed, but full of intense rapture. Her mother humours her, her father spoils her—as long as she treats him with respect. Now and then she spins a little white wool, chattering with her friends the while. That is all anyone expects of her. Sometimes she is as full of life and motion as a young starling, then again she sits moping and silent like a nightingale in a cage. She never for a moment forgets that she is a valuable piece of property, a glory which will last one or two, more rarely three, years only. Presently some old man asks her hand in marriage, her pride grows all the greater, but the happiness of her life is at an end.

As I have just hinted, the first husband of a young girl, of from twelve to fourteen years old, is an old, or at least a middle-aged man, whereas a repudiated wife, who has, of course, lost the first bloom of her beauty, often marries a boy of from thirteen to fifteen years old, which is, no doubt, one way of making the balance even. Marriage

between two young people is, however, quite the exception. A married woman of a certain age is always either a widow, a repudiated, or a divorced wife, the word divorced being used when the marriage has been annulled in favour of the woman—a thing of very rare occurrence. Celibacy is quite unknown amongst the Arab women; every girl of sixteen or eighteen is married.

Whatever may be the age of the husband, the wedding ceremony is very much the same.

The aspirant to the hand of a beautiful young woman sends his mother or some other elderly female emissary to pave the way for him by visits and flattery.

“Oh, fair one! oh, cherished one! oh, daughter of gold!” begins the go-between. “Oh, virtuous mother, thy family seems to be under the special blessing of Allah!” and so on.

Then when they return to their employer, these messengers give him an account of the prosperity of the house they have visited, the talents of the young lady, how well she can cook, spin, etc.; her health, her beauty. If the future mother-in-law is the ambassadress, she shows herself punctilious and difficult to please, whereas more distant relations, friends, or paid emissaries, are very ready with their praise. Are not all women passionately fond of match-making? Can

there be anything more delightful than to contribute to the happiness of others, even if things do turn out all wrong sometimes ?

“ You should just see her,” says the go-between ; “ why, you might take her for a masterpiece turned out by some skilful jeweller. Her teeth are as white as milk, her lips are like the



crimson flower of Paradise. Her face will charm you as does the moon in all her beauty, her supple, rounded limbs are like some vigorous tree which will yield much fruit. Truly she is the daughter of the star of the morning, and her eyes themselves are brilliant stars.”

It is related that on one occasion a go-between who, from the best of motives, had neglected to state that a certain Zorah squinted more than is consistent with beauty, replied to the remonstrances

of the husband she had led to marry the poor girl :

“ By Allah, who created thee, I told thee the truth. Remember, oh, Mabruk, oh, man, the words of my mouth ! It is not the habit of my tongue to lie. Did I tell thee that she did not squint ? Did I not, on the contrary, warn thee that a surprise, a great surprise, awaited thee, to which the astonishment of Solomon would be but small ? ”

This refers to the intense surprise of Solomon when he saw the thousand camels given to him by Allah come out of the sea. The story goes that the miracle had such an effect upon him that for whole days he forgot to pray, and allowed a jinn to steal his throne.

In a dawar, however, the husband-elect generally knows what he has to expect, and how much to believe of what the go-betweens tell him, for, as mentioned above, the girls go about with uncovered faces. Customs are very different in the kusûr, for there he will not have had a chance of seeing the features of the bride since she was quite a child. She may have changed greatly in the interval. Even in the dawar it is as well to be cautious, for, of course, it is only the girls of his own particular tribe and encampment that the suitor has seen ; he never gets a glimpse of those of any other tribe. For instance : “ Kébir-

Mohammed-ben-Naceur of the Aulâd-ben-Rir tribe has a beautiful daughter. Shall I enquire about her? The father is well off, but will she make a wife I can put up with?"

Serious questions these, and the poor candidate for matrimony has nothing to rely on but the poetic rhapsodies of the matrons he employs or the severe disparagement of his mother, who wants a daughter-in-law who will be a nonentity. He never dreams of going to the house of the family he wishes to enter, to do so would be a very great breach of etiquette. Except amongst the Shaânba of El Golea, where a suitor is allowed to take a furtive—but, at the same time, what may be called an official—look at a young girl, he has no means of seeing her; and bearing in mind the number of Arab communities in the desert, this is of course a very rare exception. So strict is the etiquette observed where marriage is in question, that even cousins who have been brought up together are separated directly there is any question of their union, which is arranged without consulting them by the parents on both sides. The two young people suddenly begin to pretend that they do not know each other, and those about them eagerly keep up the diplomatic deception: "Let us walk in the straight path and avoid all appearance of evil." (May our Lord Mohammed preserve us from it, may

Allah pour out on him and his the divine benediction. Amen!)

The husband is supposed to look upon his wife for the first time after marriage, but there are such things as sham first looks, just as there are sham orange blossoms.

In spite of all the activity of the old women in the matter, the affair of a marriage is not much advanced by their efforts. The real business of negotiation does not begin until the solemn day when the father of Mabruk goes to call on the father of Zorah.

Now ensues a perfectly indescribable discussion, not exactly comic, but terribly complicated. Prudence on the one side, vanity on the other, lead to endless debates, the dignified courtesy with which they are carried on concealing the intense excitement of those concerned in them, when the question of money comes to the fore. To fix the amount of the dowry, which to a certain extent represents the price of the woman, to argue about the cost of the trousseau, the value of the jewels brought by the bride, and all without yielding anything or showing any temper—what a business it is! But at last it is finished, and in the presence of Allah, who never sleeps and never dreams, the troth is plighted, Mabruk and Zorah are engaged.

Zorah is not supposed to know anything about

what is going on until all is arranged. You will easily guess, however, that she is not so ignorant as she seems. Still, there is all the desirable confusion about her well-assumed surprise when her father says to her one evening, "Oh, my daughter, if it please Allah, thou wilt be the wife of Mabruk-ben-Said. He is a sensible man, thou wilt walk by his side in the path of the All-merciful."

After listening to what her father says, Zorah begins to cry, to pout and to protest, as is the fashion, but all the time she is really exultant, her married friends cannot look down upon her any longer, and those who are still unmarried will gnash their teeth with rage and envy. Oh joy, oh delight! And they are preparing the *maliffas* and countless *ougayas*. And the grandmothers are weaving the rugs for the nuptial couch. And the mother is going to the nearest jeweller, to whom all the nomads flock on such an occasion as this. The father, meanwhile, is engaged in the more prosaic task of choosing the sheep which is to be roasted for the feast to be given to the men of the dawar.

Oh joy, oh delight! How the faithful will gloat over the full meal prepared for them, how they will eat it to the cheerful sound of the firing which will gladden their ears and charm their hearts.

The weeks pass on full of feverish excitement. Every afternoon crowds of young friends invade the tent or house of the betrothed, they have come to laugh and dance, to handle the new stuffs, to drink tea, and to play at cards on the sly in the corners. Oh those wicked cards, how delightful they are. Spanish ones first introduced from Morocco, and which the caravan *sokhrars* get for you for *arbâa zurji* (twopence).

There is one very quaint custom peculiar to the *kusûr* which gives a piquant flavour to a very innocent amusement. I refer to that known as stealing henna, a bit of fun in which those who are to be under the control of a master henceforth are allowed to indulge in freely before they go into the captivity of married life. Wearing old borrowed garments stained and torn—for in the Sahara a whole poem may be implied by tatters—wrapped up in a dirty veil an old negress would despise, the bride-elect is allowed to run about the town for eight days, escorted by girls not yet old enough to be shut up. Just imagine what this sudden freedom means after two or three years of seclusion! It means more than a mere prank, it means adventure with all its thrilling possibilities of mischief.

Off they go, the little party of fugitives, half afraid of their own liberty, gliding along the grey walls, disappearing in the dark, gloomy alleys.

The bride-elect leads the smallest children, whilst the bigger ones form a kind of moving rampart, or bodyguard to her. Though they laugh loud they scream with terror, running away every now and then, chirping like frightened sparrows. Then back they all trot, knocking at the doors of their friends, and even at those of strangers to them, in all the merry abandonment of a masquerade. "*Hell-el-Bab*," "Open the door," they cry. "*Ouina?*" "Who is there?" comes the reply from invisible and anxious enquirers.

There is no answer, the knockers are wild with delight.

But presently, unable to contain themselves, they cry again: "Open the door, open the door, oh, ye friends of Mohammed! We are the stealers of henna!"

Magic words, which open to the speakers the most jealously closed doors. They are the stealers of henna, no need to ask any more questions! It is a little bride-elect and her escort; shall we refuse to give them the henna they have come to steal? And so the merry, noisy troop rushes in and disperses in the winding passages of the house, where the inquisitive looks of those in the street cannot follow them.

Here they are, all together again in the small court, where they are fussed over and petted. Then, whilst the water is being heated to make

the *caouah*, the mistress of the house takes from its place near the fire the pot of plaited alfa in which the henna is simmering. With a rag soaked in the henna she dyes the bare hands and feet, first of the bride-elect, then of the little "thieves" with her. The application is repeated in every house the "stealers" go to, and by the evening the tender limbs thus anointed will be the



colour of cinnamon, a few days later the colour of old leather. But what does it matter? They have all had a good laugh, a bit of fun, they have been free! Very often they remain all night, and sleep on the rugs or *fréchias* in some hospitable house, and the hostess lets them share the evening kouskous. "*Allah iketter khérek.*" "May Allah reward thee," or, more literally, "May Allah increase thy wealth or thy happiness!" they say the next morning, after which they take their

departure, to resume their timid, furtive gliding along the mud walls, their hurried flight through the gloomy alleys, to knock at other closed doors crying: "Open, open! we are the stealers of henna!"

On the eve of the wedding the house of the bride is like a teeming hive of bees, from which all the males have disappeared, for it is the fashion amongst the men in the *kusûr* to ignore an approaching marriage, and no one takes any notice of the bridegroom. It is just the reverse in Northern Algeria, as in Egypt and in Turkey, where he is made a great fuss over. In a *kasr* the father of the bride attends to his ordinary business with affected nonchalance; the bridegroom, wearing an old burnous, goes with his friends to the café or the promenade, in fact leads his usual *dolce far niente* existence. If he is poor, he works in the garden or attends to the camels, just as if nothing was going to happen. It is only on the second day of the wedding festivities that the men on both sides meet at a big feast at which the women do not appear.

Then all is changed in the *dawar*. The guns are fired, and the revels of the young men begin; but not a man, not even the bridegroom, is allowed to penetrate beneath the tent where the *akhrossa*, or bride, is enduring being decked out with her finery—no man, except the musicians, who are

scarcely worth mentioning, and the negroes, who do not count at all.

Poor Zorah! Unfortunate martyr! Whether she squints or not, whether she be as frightful as *Shaitân* (the Demon) or as beautiful as an angel, to-day she is just a piece of wood, an idol, to be dressed, pushed, and carried about, in a word, to be tortured. Judge for yourself! Her mother began the proceedings in the morning by washing her head—I mean literally, not figuratively—with a black decoction full of little angular grains of some sort which remain in the hair. On the wet hair, for the mother does not dry it, is then poured a quantity of rancid oil, perfumed with jasmine, a scent the Prophet was fond of (“May Allah bless thy family! Amen!”) The oil trickles down on the water, the water drips under the oil. The appearance of Zorah is becoming quite lamentable, her beauty and grace are already being crushed out of her.

“May thy day be full of happiness! May Allah shower blessings upon thee!” say the relations, the inquisitive young girls and the old gossips, who arrive one after the other, with white veils completely hiding their precious gala costumes. Zorah cannot offer them her hands, for they are, alas! completely swathed in linen. Yesterday evening melted candle-grease was dropped on to her fingers, and then over the grease

henna was plastered. You will understand the reason for this torture of course? When the candle grease is removed presently, beautiful pale patches will be left, if it can be managed at regular intervals, in the corrosive brown dye on Zorah's fingers.

"By Allah! How beautiful thou art!"

Beautiful! Zorah may be beautiful generally, but she certainly is not so at this moment. However, her mother now begins to paint her, and the musicians begin to blow upon their *reithas* as an accompaniment to the *ghualla*, singing an epithalamium or nuptial song in praise of the bride.

"She is the honey which men rejoice in,
The young girls have looked on her and called her blessed,
She has won the praise of the pious and virtuous women."

The *reithas* go on playing, the noise goes on increasing. Zorah, beneath her heavy white burden, feels her mother putting two dashes of rouge on her cheeks, not to speak of the saffron smeared on her lips, the painting of her forehead, the darkening of her eyes with *kohl*. The women crowd about her as she sits on a chest to be decked with her bridal array, others keep arriving till the court and the small rooms are full to overflowing. Poor Zorah is squeezed, pinched and pushed about, everybody wants to touch her, to add a bit of

rouge here, a touch of henna there, a little of anything, it doesn't matter what.

"It is she, even she who will be a fruitful wife,
She, the chaste one, who will be the joy of her husband."

continues the nuptial song, and all the women cry in chorus, "Yu! Yu! Yu! Yu! Yu! Yu! Yu!" These frantic cries of "Yu! Yu! Yu!" go on, over every fresh article of toilette put on to poor Zorah, and on top of all her ordinary garments and all her festive array, no less than seventeen veils are piled up, one after the other, first a silk one, then a thick muslin one, alternately. Each veil is ceremoniously and slowly draped, to the accompaniment of shrill cries of "Yu! Yu! Yu!" Zorah is beginning to be stifled. Every one of her relations wishes to pin on one veil. The poor martyr, for the bride-elect truly is a martyr, is shaken about, and pinched, whilst she gasps for air. Yu! Yu! Yu! At last, on the top of the edifice the mother places a crown of gold, necklaces, chains, brooches, ear-rings and chains of a formidable weight. Yu! Yu! Yu! Zorah is fainting, but nobody takes any notice of that, her sighs of distress are drowned in the noise made by the women, the nuptial song, and the nasal sound of the *reithas*.

The confusion is now at its height. The crowd is no longer a meeting of acquaintances ; it is a seething, indistinguishable mass of feminine humanity, over which a big negro now begins with uplifted arms, to sprinkle perfume. Then from the terrace above grain and kouskous are flung down, as symbols of abundance and fertility, the women



greeting each fresh shower with their endless Yu! Yu! Yu!

"May blessings be upon thee, oh Zorah, may the benediction of Allah be with thee!"

"Yu! Yu! Yu! Yu! Yu! Yu!"

I would not advise any one from Paris to venture into the awful crowd, from which rises up a mixed and oppressive odour of musk, cloves, and flesh and blood. A fainting fit would be

sure to be the result, unless months of previous training have been gone through, and even then a bottle of very strong salts would be necessary. Poor Zorah, however, has to hold out in spite of her seventeen veils, one on top of the other. But even now it is not enough. She is pinched to bring her back to the exigencies of the occasion, and then a heavy covering is put on over all the veils, on top of which is placed a carpet. Thus swathed beyond recognition, the bundle is hoisted on to the shoulders of the negro, whose duty it is to place the bride on the mule which is to take her to the house of the bridegroom. Amongst the nomads a camel with a bassur, or palanquin, replaces the mule, but the ceremonial remains much the same in both cases.

Well, there is poor Zorah on the back of a snorting mule, and astride behind her is a negress, whose business it is to keep the bundle from overbalancing itself, and tumbling off. The procession starts at last, the mule leading the way, whilst all the women follow on foot, with hastily-adjusted veils, keeping up their never-ending "Yu! Yu! Yu!" whilst a negress on another mule, also astride—it is the fashion in these parts—brings up the rear. Instead of the package containing the bride-elect, this second negress has a big bundle of fréchias and cushions to look

after, on the top of which is a chest, containing the trousseau, the wedding presents and the nuptial bed.

Five or six hours have now passed by. It is evening, just before the prayer of 'Asha. The female friends and relations of the bridegroom have just left his house, each carrying her diadem carefully wrapped in a handkerchief. And where is Zorah? She is reclining between her mother-in-law and her sisters-in-law, stupefied with fatigue, in all the reaction of the quiet pause which has succeeded the noise and confusion.

The men have not yet reappeared, neither has the bridegroom put in an appearance; for in this land of gentle manners there is none of the coarseness so often described by travellers amongst the Arabs of the Northern districts. In the South the father of the bride, however poor, protects his daughter carefully from any roughness, and there is none of the traffic in young girls which is a disgrace elsewhere. It is the father of the bride, too, who meets most of the expenses of the wedding, giving, in clothes, jewels, and rugs, more than equivalent for the modest dowry paid by the bridegroom.

There is a delicacy, or apparent delicacy at least, observed in dealing with everything connected with marriage; and, without being

exactly what would be called prudish in Europe, the people of Southern Algeria have an almost exaggerated idea of what we understand by modesty.

But let us return to our Zorah. She has re-



covered a little now from her tremors and the sufferings she endured during her toilette. She will have supper in the evening with the women of her husband's family, then she will be led into the nuptial chamber, a very simple little retreat, and there, amongst the feather pillows,

she will await with trembling limbs and beating heart the coming of Mabruk, who has remained away all day, and will steal into his home through the court like a thief. Let us draw a veil over the privacy of bride and bridegroom. The next night, and the next, Mabruk will steal in in a similar way, then he will resume his ordinary mode of life, and at the end of eight days, when the time of his wife is no longer entirely taken up by receiving the visits of her friends and playing with them, he will feel as if he had been married for eight centuries. Presently (unless he and Zorah are too young and inexperienced to keep house) he will take his bride to live with some old female relation in a little separate home, or in a new tent pitched in the dawar to which his parents belong.

For a year, sometimes for two years, the bride will not do any work. For that time she remains *en toilette* from the morning to the evening ; she is queen for the time being, giving herself airs and preening herself like some young turtle-dove. She is still the bride, and every one speaks of her as the *ahrossa*.

I know that all too often her happiness is only apparent, and there is rarely much security about it when it is real. I know, too, what a reputation for tyranny mothers-in-law have in the

Sahara ; but for all that, is it not a charming custom thus to guard the precocious young flower, to try to arrest for a moment the inevitable blight which the wear and tear of life must bring with it ?

CHAPTER XII.

DIVORCE IN THE SAHARA.

IN the Sahara the terrible old verb, divorce, which in Europe means the destruction of family happiness, but there its best protection, is conjugated in a very simple manner. How shall I translate that conjugation? Perhaps the following rendering will give a true idea of the position. "*I* want another wife, *thou* wouldest be in the way, because *she* has a negress, thou wouldest not be wanted here to wait on her, so *we* will part; *you* will take back your child and *they*, everybody, will be satisfied." As for the parents of the fair one, or the ex-fair one, to be more accurate, to whom the second person plural refers, they will protest because they have no wish to have to refund the half-dowry paid by their son-in law, but would prefer that he should have to pay it to them.

The bridegroom has, however, generally arranged some pretext for divorce before he ventures to moot the question. The fact is customs in Southern Algeria, the Algeria of the vast stretches of sand,

of the simoon and the fevers it brings in its track, have still all the old simplicity of patriarchal days ; nothing has really changed since the time of Mohammed, and Mohammed himself did not modify in the very smallest degree the ways of the nomads, descendants of those who had kept the flocks of Babylon and of Tyre, who followed his standard into Africa from Arabia, Chaldæa, Mesopotamia and Bactria.

Descendants of shepherds, and shepherds themselves — whether they be called Larbâa, Saïd Otba, Shaânba - Berasga, or Shaânba - bou - Ruba, they are all used to wandering for long distances in search of pasturage, they are all brave and sturdy, they all dress and live simply, they all have the same—or very similar—divorce customs, and all are equally ingenious in proving the infidelity of their wives, or, to use the Arab expression, the violation of their tents, if it suits their purpose.

The infidelity proved—or said to be proved—Zorah, Fatma, or Aïsha is sent back to her parents, or given to the man she has preferred. However that may be, the husband loses nothing ; at least, he loses no money, for he does not have to pay the full dowry for a wife who has been unfaithful. Moreover, he gets back the instalment already given to the bride's parents, or, if they are unable to pay it, he tries to get it out of the new husband.



A REPUDIATED WIFE.

We must not judge these husbands and wives of the Sahara too severely ; they act up to their lights, and there are many things tolerated in European society which will bear investigation far less than these Arab customs. We can never hope to understand thoroughly natures so unlike our own. In course of time we shall probably introduce amongst them certain European bad habits and vices, but we shall remain as ignorant as ever of what they really are. They are Asiatics dating their descent back for many thousand years ; Asiatics transferred to the sterile, arid soil of Africa. How can they help being fickle, crafty, and treacherous ? Should we judge prehistoric animals seriously, enquiring rigidly into their honesty or their morality ? Of course not. Neither then should we apply modern European standards to these survivals of a world gone by.

It is life in the tent, with all its quaint, child-like customs, all its old-world superstitions, which is the foundation of society amongst the nomads, whether they belong to the Wâdy-Seb-Seb, the Wâdy-N'ca, or any other Wâdy. First the tent, then the dawar, and then the tribe. Above the tribe absolutely nothing in the way of organization, except the foreign officials—Turk or Rûmi as the case may be—whom Allah has permitted to conquer the world provisionally, as a punishment for the sins of men.

Many families may be grouped under the authority of what may be called a tent chieftain; families related to, or allied with, that chieftain, such as those of the son-in-law, brother-in-law, or nephew, but it often happens that the household—or, to coin a word, the tenthold—consists of the family strictly so called, that is to say, of the husband and his wife or wives, his young sisters, an old widowed grandmother, and a negress, whose little ones, black or brown, play about in the sand with the better cared-for children of paler complexions.

All these *mutchatchus*, as the Arabs call them, are, as a rule, brothers and sisters—on the father's side at least. "Happy," says Allah, "are the faithful who content themselves with their wives and the negresses they have won with their right arm (that is to say, those they have honestly bought or obtained in war), for they will never be re-proved." Four wives and as many black servants as they like, are all that are allowed to a good Mussulman. But, as I have already had occasion to remark, most Arabs are content with one wife; few take two, fewer still three, and it is a very rare thing for any one to have four. Except amongst the very wealthy members of a tribe, there is only one legitimate wife in a family. But a nomad who has never had more than one wife at a time will, perhaps, have had as many as

fifteen in the course of his life, one replacing, or rather driving out, another, according to the fancy of the husband, or the indiscretions brought home to the wife for the time being.

Now, what is the state of mind, in view of approaching divorce, of the woman to whom the Koran refuses so much, rarely allowing her any share in the life beyond the grave, and only then in the company of her husband (which of the successive husbands lived with on earth the sacred book does not say)? Does she rebel against her fate? What does she think and feel, especially when the moment comes for leaving the tent of her husband and returning to that of her father, who, summoned in all haste, has come to fetch her, the mute reproach in his eyes seeming but the earnest of other—less silent—reproaches to come?

This is what she feels :

When the verdict has been spoken, she cries, she howls, she sobs, she tears her hair, and scratches her face. What, leave the tent, become a repudiated wife—for she is only divorced when she is the complaining party—leave the saucepan and the *kesskess* or strainer in which she has so often prepared the *kouskous* for happy evenings gone by? and the gueçaa or big wooden mould, and the hand-mill in which she has ground the flour so many times, and with so much hard work. She

rolls herself on the ground in her distress. What, are the carpets and *fréchias* of which she has been so proud to be hers no longer; must her very jewels be left behind? the big bracelets, the massive *khalkhals* or tinkling hair ornaments, the ringing sound of which keeps vermin away, and attracts the attention of admirers? Oh, it is too terrible! Her heart is wrung with anguish. Sud-



denly she starts up invoking the aid of Allah, and of Sidi-Abd-el-Kader-el Jilani, the saint of Bagdad. She begins to curse and to blaspheme. She makes up the wildest excuses for her conduct and fabricates the most unlikely stories. She threatens to kill her husband, herself, their children, if they have any, and when this is all over and it generally lasts about two days, she quietly mounts the camel or the mule which is to take her

back across the melancholy desert. She no longer thinks of making up some fantastic story to turn aside the wrath of the Sidi, her father, who escorts her in a silence which bodes her no good, or to make him believe that it is with her ex-husband, not with her, that he should be angry.

At least she is free now, should opportunity offer for another alliance, to choose for herself, a woman who has once been married being allowed to take any second husband she likes. The father's authority is only absolute in the case of the first.

Before the drama of repudiation begins, however, some years, certainly some months, of married life have gone by, during which the husband and wife have passed through various developments and changes. First has come the traditional time of idleness for the bride. Then Mohammed-ben-Abder-Rahman sets about having his wife trained to her household work. With Zorah his first wife, or Graira his seventh, the same routine is gone through. The grandmothers of the family have already taught her to spin and weave, and she used to play at doing a little work at home when her mother was making a burnous or a carpet. Hitherto, the preparation of the flour for the *kouskous* and the suckling of the baby, if there is one, are all she has had to do, but now she must take her share in the daily work of the tent, which is light and easy enough, if we compare it with that of the poor

old Arab women, or even of that of many women in the agricultural districts of Europe.

All the menial tasks, including the care of the children, is done by the old women, but, in spite of all that is said to the contrary, the men take their full share in the really arduous work, and it is often only the obstinacy of the aged women themselves, which makes them undertake what is too hard for them.

The wife will still find favour in the eyes of her husband, or rather of her master, as long as she can make herself pleasant to him, and he can take a pride in her beauty, and is assured of her fidelity. It must be remembered, however, that the woman of the desert is not veiled, not sequestered, not even kept under any particular surveillance. She talks freely with any of the men of the dawar, and is careful and modest in her deportment when in public. The only restriction is, that she is forbidden to allow a Rûmi to approach her, and will flee away at the sight of a foreigner, as if in the greatest terror.

Now to what does the modesty of the women of the dawar really amount? What are the chances, for instance, of the fidelity of Graira, the seventh wife of Mohammed-ben-Abder-Rahman, chieftain of the tent?

Fidelity! Half the time she does not know what the word or the thing itself means. Probably

when the dawar happened to be camped near a *zauia* of merchants, her brothers may have learnt certain principles of morality, and a few verses of the Koran. But she herself, except for the short prayer of the prescribed Sûrah, and one or two invocations, knows absolutely nothing. In theory, her husband ought to be wise and prudent for her. He is the master, the moralist, the teacher of the hearth. It is for him to inculcate the lessons received from Allah by the Prophet.

“Tell the wives of the faithful to lower their eyes, and observe continence, to allow only their outer ornaments to be seen, to cover their breasts with a veil! Let them not move their feet so as to display the hidden jewels (*khalkhals*) of their ankles. Thus it will be more easy for them to escape misconstruction and calumny.”

With very rare exceptions, the husband does not trouble to explain the sacred precepts to his wife. He is content to issue his orders, and is not very much surprised if they are disobeyed. He does his share—not, perhaps half, nor a third nor a quarter, where polygamy is indulged in—gives his wife presents, and behaves courteously to her when she is still new, and still beautiful. After that, if he keeps her, he simply looks upon her as a servant, and treats her kindly, never molesting her in any way.

But we have left the modesty and fidelity of

Graïra very far behind. Her modesty then consists in vaguely observing the precepts quoted above, that is to say, she does not tinkle her anklets, except when her husband is out of hearing, she refastens her drapery when it comes undone, and draws her *ougaya* over her mouth and chin, when



in the presence of a stranger. Her fidelity consists in yielding to every passing fancy, to being, in fact, a natural young animal, who is surprised at nothing. Naively she prays to the Sidi Abd-el-Kader, he who breaks the hearts of the evil doers, the pious lieutenant of Allah, to keep her husband, Mohammed, from suspecting her, for she naively

supposes that her guilt may be proved, even if she is innocent, through the machinations of Iblis (the devil), or of some malevolent jinn whom she has unwittingly offended. She is equally convinced that, if guilty, her innocence may be triumphantly proved; in fact, to her, guilt is not guilt, nor innocence innocence; it is all a question of what her husband thinks.

CHAPTER XIII.

WARGLA, THE PEARL OF THE OASES.

GUARDED, so to speak, by the encampments of the great nomad tribes, Wargla, surnamed the Pearl, and the Queen of the Oases, lies brown and weary-looking, between the salt lake of the mirage and the burning oasis, where grow the stunted but fruitful palms for which the neighbourhood is so celebrated. Indeed, the Wargla oasis alone owns something like a million and a half of these trees, nine hundred thousand of which are constantly watered ; for, to quote the saying of the Sahara, they have their feet in the water, and their heads in the fire. The annual yield of choice dates, including the celebrated variety known as the *Deglet-en-Nour*, amounts to no less than 25,000 hundredweight.

Strange, mystic, mysterious town, whose sultans owned no Lord but Allah, until the French, the Rûmis, came to it as conquerors.

On that day of triumph for the Rûmis and regret for the people of Wargla, some of the

former may have learnt the legendary origin of the City of Roses, the Belle of the Desert, the Queen, the Pearl of Cities. I have noticed in the course of my travels, that every very ancient community has had, in popular report, some great man of the past as a founder; some splendid hero who chose the site for himself out of all others, the further mythical history of the place having been evolved from the imagination of its inhabitants.

Now in this case, it was Solomon, King of Jerusalem, master of the winds and of the clouds, Lord of the Spirits, who, out of the goodness of his heart, undertook the task of building Wargla, or, at least, of having it built by genii, jinns, and angels. The city rose up suddenly, with the houses, the streets, the walls, the very mosques of the present day, and that, too, many centuries before the time of Mohammed! Yet more wonderful, by a supreme miracle, one of the female angels who aided in its construction still lives in one of the mosques, immured by order of the King between the walls of the minaret, there to act, whether she likes it or not, as guardian of the town and protector of all, the miserable or the happy, against the demon, or Satan, whom they call *Shaitân*.

During my stay in Wargla, I never was able to bring myself to believe in its supernatural origin. You may live there rocked in a dream

of a very Oriental, and yet essentially African, nature, for the cooing of doves responds to the sighing of distant flutes; of an evening, too, when from every closed door issue musty odours, and the sound of gentle merriment is heard, you can fancy



yourself transported, not to Solomon's Palace, but to the wretched little town, with its mud houses, belonging to Bilkis,* Queen of Sheba, whom

* Bilkis is not named in the Bible, but only referred to in certain Arab traditions, in which she is sometimes confused with Zenobia, Queen of Palmyra. There is a story about the Queen of Sheba in the Koran (Sûrah xxvii.—20), but her name is not given. It is probably to this story that the author refers.—TRANS.

the Jewish monarch was, it is said, so fond of visiting.

History gives us very little information about Wargla. The sedentary race occupying the district at the time of Sallust, whom he calls the Garamantes, were of a very different stock to the present inhabitants. An old manuscript refers to Wargla as a flourishing city in the year 937 of the Christian era, famous for its markets, its public buildings, and its schools, in which many learned *tolbas* were trained. It reached the culminating point of its prosperity in the year 1238 (626 of Hegira), when a certain mosque, now in ruins, was built under the auspices of Abu-Zacharia. This was the great epoch, the culminating point, of Wargla's glory, but every apogee is of necessity followed by decadence. During the ten years preceding the French conquest, or, rather annexation, of 1882, Wargla sank to the very lowest depth of decrepitude. Since then there has been something of a revival; and, submitting with a good grace to French authority, the people do not seem to regret the Sultans of whom they were once so proud. Truth to tell, they love strict government, and are not in the least fitted for freedom.

The descendants of the ancient Garamantes are now called the Ghuâra, and occupy the Wâdy-Mia with the whole of the basin of the Wâdy-R'ir, as far as beyond Tuggurt.

Although they are generally classed with the Berbers, they really preserve almost unchanged the typical Hindu peculiarities they brought with them from the south, when, some five or six centuries before the Arabs, they came to settle in these torrid deserts. Thin but not emaciated, well-made but not robust, and with a very characteristic clear-brown complexion, those, especially the men, who are of pure descent unmixed with negro blood, have regular features, and are often very handsome. The faces of the women are not so pleasing, but they have charming figures; and, although their waists are sometimes a little too long, the modelling of the bust and of the limbs leaves nothing to find fault with.

At the risk of being laughed at for quoting myself, I must insert here a sentence from another book of mine, describing a passing procession :

“Draped in their red or green veils were old and young women. The latter wore their hair in curls falling right over their jet-black eyes, and their gleaming teeth were whiter than the cowries on their foreheads, and their anklets jingled against each other in a most seductive way, whilst their perfect arms held in place the transparent drapery swathing their mobile limbs. These were brunettes, lovely young brunettes, for

whom admirers of complexions like theirs compose love songs :

“ ‘ She is like the black date upon its stem,
Her lips are as red as the wax of a gem. ’ ”

The women thus lauded are intelligent, and their frank and lively natures singularly combine playfulness and love of pleasure with common sense. I remember with what pride they used to shew me their rooms when I paid them a visit. Dark, gloomy little apartments ranged round a small court of beaten earth, in each of which certain primitive and pathetic efforts had been made to make things comfortable. Instead of sleeping on the ground as the Arab women do, they use couches, spreading fréchias, or rugs, over quite springy mattresses made of palm-stems. On the crumbling walls they stretch pieces of stuff, and against this background they arrange in symmetrical order, glasses, plates, cups, strings of beads, etc., which they have bought from caravans ; precious treasures, carefully hung up and daily thoroughly dusted. I do not quite know why, but I was infinitely touched by finding amongst these simple children of the Desert these ideas of Art drapery and decorative knick-knacks.

They did not say to me here : “ Thou art our sister,” but they cried : “ Oh, how glad we are to

see thee! What a pleasure! Praised be Allah!" This was just as gushing, but it seemed to me more sincere, than the greetings at five-o'clock tea between European ladies. These Ghuâra women were modestly proud of knowing how to speak Arabic, which is so different from their own language. Evidently they had some idea of what culture means, of using several different words to express the same meaning, and their intellects are certainly superior to those of their husbands or their brothers.

Very peaceable and free is their life. They spin and weave a little after their household work is done, and in every home the wife is queen, for there is no polygamy here. They go out when they like, and their dignified bearing keeps their fellow-countrymen and foreigners alike at a distance. They are not a prey to the silly fears of the Mozabite women; and different, indeed, was the treatment received here to that accorded to us by the inhospitable people of the Wâdy M'zab, where my young attendant, Miloud-ben-Ch'tiui, was always banished outside the door. Here the child became the pet and plaything of my hostesses, and was charged, from five o'clock in the morning till the evening, with constant complicated messages and bunches of roses for me.

I alluded above to the love of amusement amongst the Ghuâra. It is indeed very great,

and in every alley the sound of the tambourines is constantly heard. Now a procession files along to the accompaniment of rhythmic song, now some pious offering is to be made, or a fête is suddenly improvised, or again, some invalid suffering from an obstinate headache, tries what may be called the dancing cure (*moulet-er-rass*).

Some explanation of the dancing cure seems called for here. When a woman is afflicted with sick headache, she easily gets her husband to let her have the benefit of the *moulet-er-rass*, for which he will pay the singers, but of which he himself, poor man, will hear and see nothing, for the noisy meeting is attended by women alone. The husband's consent secured, the friends of the sufferer are summoned in haste, generally in the evening, or sometimes even in the middle of the night. Friends bring their friends, and these friends in their turn their acquaintances, till a dense crowd is assembled of women, with brown complexions, their black hair carefully curled and decked with little blue beads, their figures swathed in sombre-hued veils.

The musicians are led by their *ghualla*, or improvisatrice, doctress or divineress; and very interesting did I find the female soothsayers or *ghuallas* with whom I became acquainted. I must introduce you specially to one of them, the attenuated Miluda, whose skill in various direc-

tions, as a letter of blood and in applying French lettuce soap internally, has won for her a great reputation.

But I must return to our *moulet-er-rass*; the *ghualla*, Miluda herself, if you like, begins by reciting a long incantation. Then, whilst the assembled women sing a hymn in chorus, she



burns a quantity of benzoin under the very nose of the patient. Rrrran, rrrran, rrrran, go the tambourines all the time. The singers redouble their efforts, the smoke from the benzoin rises up from an earthenware pan. At last, when the supplications and invocations are over, when the invalid is absolutely suffocated with the thick fumes of the burning resin, two of her companions approach her gently, and, still gently,

raise her up by the arms and make her dance, dance, dance, dance—madly, distractedly,—amongst all the other dancers, whilst the tambourines continue their ceaseless Rrrran, rrrran, rrrran. “Yes; dance, dance, sufferer, dance for hour upon hour; dance, the exercise will relieve the congestion of thy brain;” and again rings out the strident chant, to the persistent Rrrran, rrrran, rrrran of the tambourines.

The fact is, absurd as it may sound, the invalid always is quite well again the next morning, cured by the triple force of the dancing, the prayer, and the benzoin. We can but bow—and dance—to such a result as this!

Of course, no one dreams of depriving an invalid of the benefits of the *moulet-er-rass*! Then there are other impromptu amusements, not to speak of the wedding festivities, which are shared in by every one in the town, for all the marriages are solemnized on the same day, once a year. The bridegrooms and their escorts of men march jauntily along on one side of the street to the sound of instruments of music, whilst the brides with their following of women walk in procession on the other, their supple limbs moving in unison and their anklets tinkling, as they trip along on their dainty feet. Draped in sombre-coloured veils, with their heads completely swathed in silk handkerchiefs, the little newly-married wives look like mysterious

phantoms, and the sharp flon-flon of the *reïtha*, or clarionet, is more impressive than cheerful. Truly, it is a strange spectacle, this long procession, which is repeated for seven consecutive days, winding through all the streets and squares of the town, none of those taking part in it ever showing any failure of courage or of enthusiasm.

Imagine what must be the condition of the



delicate brides, when at last the fêtes and the dancing are over and they sink down, half-dead with fatigue, with bruised and weary limbs.

The expression "innocent pleasure" seems hardly admissible here, for the over-fatigue does positive harm to health. But there is nothing immoral about any of the Ghuâra customs, and it is rare indeed for a woman belonging to this race to be guilty of an indiscretion. In fact, this

pastoral land is a true Arcadia, in which the men, as well as the women, lead pure and simple lives.

The stronger sex does not disdain impromptu dancing, and of an evening, at the cross roads and in the squares, you may see a very good imitation of the dances of the Ghuâra women, or of those indulged in by the Tuareg and Shaânba warriors elsewhere. The sharp clicking of the metal castanets is accompanied by the beating of what is called a *tar* (a sort of large chest), harmonious singing, long drawn out and rapid notes, mingled with the plaintive sighing of solos on the flute from the distance, all combine to produce the wild seductive charm characteristic of Wargla.

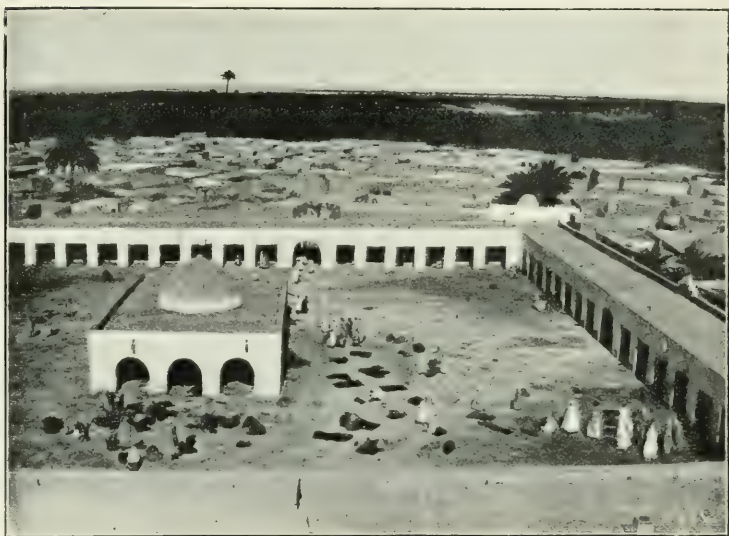
Somewhat similar is the effect, as the corner of some alley is turned, of the intermittent light from the torches of pine wood, bringing into vivid but brief relief the details of the strange scene; fit symbol, in its transient radiance, of this Ghuâra town, and the sudden fits of gaiety of its inhabitants, the gaiety of a gentle-mannered people, which, however, becomes just now and then something like folly, if not madness. This is especially the case in the yearly saturnalia, when the men run about the streets stark naked (an extraordinary proceeding amongst the Arabs, who are generally so very modest), smeared with pitch and wild

with excitement, flinging for one evening all restraint to the winds.

The next morning, however, they are back again in the oasis gardens, watering the palms, and cultivating the grain. Artesian wells, which they owe to their predecessors, the Garamantes, and the secret of the boring of which has never been discovered, provide them with a fairly good supply of water. And very considerable would be the harvest, or rather the profit, they would reap, if the greater portion did not go to the owners of the soil, either Mozabites or wealthy nomads, of whom the Ghuâra are only the *khammes*, that is to say, the farmers, who receive but a fifth part of the yield of the palms.

The chief nomad tribes who encamp about Wargla include the Aulâd-ben-Said and Aulâd-Smaïl, the Shaânba, the M'khadma, the Beni-Thur, and the Said-Otba, representatives of all of which may be seen mingling with the brown-skinned Ghuâra in the market-place, a large quadrilateral enclosure of arcades, with a monument in the centre. The four massive doors are closed every evening at the same time as the posterns in the walls of the city. The goods for sale in this market, are exposed in clumsy stalls, which swarm with flies; horrible creatures, of an infinite variety, all tenacious of their prey, forming with scorpions and fevers the chief scourges of

the country. Nothing and nobody is free from these persistent pests, which interrupt without ceremony the discussions going on in the shops, or near the *tellis*, as the loads of dates are called. Prayers are offered up near the shambles, where the



camels are killed, and the flies disturb even the surgical operations, which are all performed in the market ; for the barber-surgeons co-operate in the treatment of patients with *Miluda*, and other female soothsayers, in the outlying portions of it. There people are bled *coram populi* ; gashes are made behind the ear, a prophetic oration is pronounced over

the wounds (the more incomprehensible it is, the more efficacious it is supposed to be), and behold ! you are cured, ready to dance, to beat yourself about and to hold forth eloquently amongst the old cronies in the covered-in alleys of the villages.

Very extraordinary are these arched - over thoroughfares in the hamlets, in the neighbourhood of Wargla, such as Ruïssat and Chott-el-Hajaja. They are met with even as far away as Tuggurt, and they are so pitch dark that the doors opening out of them are rather felt than seen. Here and there these passages widen sufficiently to enclose low blocks of masonry, used either as couches for taking siestas, or as seats for a friendly chat with a neighbour after a nap. At intervals where the alleys meet there are openings in the roofs, through which falls a dash of sunshine, making the surrounding gloom appear yet greater.

When the hour for prayer arrives, the old men issue from the alleys to go to the mosques, responding to the musical summons of the muezzins, and as soon as ever the door-ways and siesta benches are vacated, the women come swarming out, and hordes of children, in many-coloured garments, rush forth from the mysterious recesses of the houses. A babble of feminine chatter, less childish here than amongst the Arab women, succeeds the grave and reserved discourse of the grey-bearded men, and the merry antics of the little Ghuâra in

their light raiment, the calm, dignified attitudes of their white-robed grandfathers.

Presently, when prayers are over, the men return, and the troops of children, with many a shrill cry, run away again and disperse. Once more the politics of the Southern Sahara, its grotesque, its futile, and its complex ambitions, are solemnly discussed in the close obscurity of the hot, dark passages.

CHAPTER XIV.

FROM TUGGURT TO IN-SALAH.

IF you draw a straight line on a map between Tuggurt and In-Salah it will pass through many deeply interesting districts, and if, coming from the Sahara, you follow your straight line, you will meet with examples of nearly every race of the desert.

Tuggurt, a brown coloured town, inhabited by Ghuâra, is very like Wargla in appearance, but its origin, or reputed origin, was very different. In this case the founder was a woman, and a woman of no very good reputation, who, having become rich through her evil ways, wished to buy forgiveness for her sins by building a refuge for the old and poor. Only unfortunately—and this, as a certain Brother Jean des Entommeures once said, is the gist of the story, other women of bad reputation came to live near the rescued poor who had now become rich, owning land in the Sahara ; so rich, indeed, that the money, dates, and kouskous so lightly come by were equally readily given away. The foundress in her

despair tore the wool which represented her once plentiful tresses, but to her objurgations the intruders only replied : " Thou hast had thy turn, oh wealthy one : now it is ours ! "

At last the infant city, to which the very scandal connected with it attracted merchants and players of what the natives call *khr'ab'r'ab*, fell into the stronger hands of a warrior of the neighbourhood, who began by turning out the inmates of the refuge to take up his own abode in it, and finally married its foundress to avoid any future disputes about ownership. This wise warrior was the first Sultan of Tuggurt, who reigned long, long before the Ben-Jellab dynasty.

As we toiled wearily and painfully across the evil-smelling *chott* and dunes of the Southern Sahara, where the shifting sand gives away beneath the softly-padded foot of the camel, I thought to myself that perhaps I had not said quite enough about the *fassedett*, as the professional beauties are called, in my account of the women of the desert. It is a painful subject, but no account of the people of the Sahara would be complete without a few words about it. To begin with, I must explain that it is a mistake to suppose that the paint, the henna, and the heavy golden ornaments, such as the *Louis-d'or* and the hundred-franc pieces, worn by the *fassedett*, are either the exclusive marks or the rewards of their profession, for all these are ornaments affected

by married women on fête days. The unfortunate girls have really no distinctive costume, nothing to set them apart from their virtuous sisters, except perhaps the ostrich feather they all sport. The *fassedett* are often spoken of as Aulâd-Nails, but that too is a mistake, for many of the almehs, or dancers and painted girls, whom men admire so much, do not belong to that tribe. Whatever their right name, however, I made up my mind to find out something about these wearers of the heavy gold necklaces and the diadems with the frontlets of smaller coins falling almost to the eyebrows above the jet-black eyes. Perhaps, as the attention I have given to them is so entirely disinterested, I may have been able to get a truer insight into their poor little souls than my brothers of the sterner sex, and truth to tell, I have found several of those souls, careless, frivolous and unconscious of the tragic elements of their position, though they be, not so very different from the virtuous souls of many legal wives. They are typical feminine souls of the race Mohammed knew so well; to the women of whom he denied the possession of a soul at all, in accordance with the orders of Allah made known to him by the angel Jibril or Gabriel.

The *fassedett* do not form a caste apart. Some few of them belong to the Aulâd-Nail tribe, whose ideas are emancipated, but these go to Biskra and the Northern towns. Those who frequent the Southern districts of the Sahara belong to nomad

tribes, chiefly those of the kusûr, and are the children of poor parents.

Many of them are very intelligent, even versatile. Children of the people, they retain their own mode of speech, their attitudes and their gestures ; but they can imitate to perfection the haughty dignity of the wives of the Caids, the expression of the mouth, the stiff pose of the head beneath the weighty diadem, which was the envy of their childhood. They are to the poor sokhrar, or camel driver, sheep seller or spahi, the very embodiment of beauty, and to the rich of luxury. To the latter, of course, they are mere temporary playthings in whom their admirers take pleasure, as they do in the other luxuries their wealth enables them to procure.

Such are the fassedett of Southern Sahara. Look at one of them dancing who has not adopted the coarse and ugly fashion introduced from Egypt by the Turks. How mysterious is the twinkling motion of her feet, alike sensual and modest, how those feet seem to tremble with love, how imploringly her little hands are raised to Heaven ; with what sudden despair her wrists droop like the broken stem of a flower ; or again, how she poises with outspread arms as a bee hovers over some blossom, and at last sinks exhausted to the floor with limbs relaxed and trembling. She is to the dwellers in the extreme South of the Sahara,



A PROFESSIONAL DANCER.

the very idealization of the real, the realization of the ideal.

The dancer herself is quite aware that her life is sinful ; but she always hopes to wash away its guilt when she retires, by making a pilgrimage, by prayers, and by alms. Meanwhile, she seems thoroughly to enjoy the lot she has chosen, and does not mind the scorn of her married sisters in the least. She has ambition enough to keep her happy without any overstrain on her heart. One day I asked a young *débutante* in a little Saharian *kasr* if she was not vexed at owning so few jewels. "Oh, no," she answered, simply, "that does not trouble me, for I know I shall get some more—a few every day." Nothing could give any idea of the quiet candour of this reply. Tainted water often runs more quietly than a clear stream, no doubt, and where guilt is not felt there is no sting of remorse.

Swallows of love, the *fassedett* migrate from *kasr* to *kasr* in the Sahara, and will be found at Wargla after passing through the little town of N'Guça, the present Caïd of which claims descent from the nurse of the Prophet. The Said nomads of dignified presence, the Shaânba, the Otba Beni-Thur, and all the other wanderers of the desert, will be delighted to find them when they reach the crowded meeting places in their route.

Beyond the Wâdy Mia, however, these meeting places become more and more rare, for the accumulated sand, its surface swept and crumbled into dust by the wind, presents a most formidable obstacle to marching, and when the *gaci*, as the hardened ground is called, or the rocky Hamada district replaces the Ergesh sand hills, the fate of the traveller becomes even worse, for there are no wells and the water stored in the skins soon becomes tainted beneath the burning rays of the sun.

Land of monotonous beauty, hated by many, but loved by its own children! Yes; the Shaânba wrapped in their burnouses, the Tuaregs swathed in their sombre veils, all love it, this terrible desert. The French domination is grudgingly submitted to by the first, and hated by the second, not only for material and religious reasons, but because they are afraid that the foreigners may make changes in their deeply-cherished Sahara.

The two most out-lying inhabited points, the Zauïa (chapel, refuge or convent) of Temassinin and the kasr of El-Golea, before you come to In-Salah and the Tuat oasis, are on the left and right of the imaginary line alluded to above. The Zauïa belongs to the religious order of the Tijani, one of the most liberal of the Southern Sahara, and it was with its members at Temassinin that the French explorer Duveyrier took refuge from

the Azgueur and Hoggar Tuaregs. Here, too, is now the last French post in the direction of Air and Lake Tchad. The kasr of El-Golea, the occupation of which by the French aroused the jealousy of Morocco, is a kind of foretaste of Tuat



and Gurara. The scenery changes greatly in character ; mountains begin to appear, and there is a difference about the oases, for you can actually see water gleaming amongst the palm trees. Once the constant resort of the Shaânba, it is now merely their market and storehouse.

I fancy it will be very much the same thing with In-Salah, recently occupied by the French, and the other Tuareg harbours of refuge. In-Salah, the capital and fortress of the oasis of Tidikelt, is the key of the Tuat, Gurara, and Messaura, those rich, fertile and populous districts in which one oasis succeeds another as far as Igli, representing an area equal to a third of France, dotted with a perfect chaplet of wealthy kusûr, or fortified villages, of which there are no less than 349, owning amongst them twelve million date palms.

Now, until recently the whole of this district was practically a *terra incognita* amongst the French possessions, represented in maps by a blank space, in the very heart of French Africa. Not only were the French not masters of it, they had not even the right of entering, still less of crossing, it; a fact which was alike embarrassing and irritating, hampering all commercial as well as political dealings with the newly-annexed neighbouring territories.

All, absolutely all, the trade carried on by caravan between the Soudan and the North, that is to say, Morocco, Algeria, Tunis and Tripoli, passes through the Tuat oasis and In-Salah. The Hoggar Tuaregs, the fierce protectors of the convoys, compel the camel drivers and merchants to take this route because their own particular depôt is at In-Salah. It is no light matter to cross

the will of a Targui, as an individual member of the Tuareg tribe is called, for, if he gets out of temper, he is just as likely to rob as to protect, and, instead of protecting, he sometimes slays. The money he has received as the price of his fidelity does not trouble him in the least.

Properly speaking, In-Salah is not a town. It is a group of four little kusûr, built very close together, each with its citadel and fortifications, and the population of all four is only 3,200, with some 5,000 more belonging to the fifteen outlying villages of the suburbs.

In-Salah, however, does not owe its prestige to the number of its inhabitants, whether merchants or warriors, but to the fact that it was supposed to be inaccessible. The people of the Tuat, Gurara, and Messaura oases expected, sooner or later, to see the French arrive from the North or West with the permission of Allah, when he should wish to chastise them for their sins ; but Tidikelt and In-Salah, in the east, were looked upon as absolutely impregnable ramparts. This popular delusion was shared by no less than 400,000 souls, for that is the approximate total number of the inhabitants of the oasis, a large figure when compared with that of the population elsewhere in the Sahara.

The French occupation of the Tuat oasis almost

necessarily changed the course, still merely theoretical, of the Trans-Saharan railway. Better still, it won over many who had hitherto opposed the scheme of its construction; for the trade between Tuat and Timbuktu, and Tuat and the Mediterranean, would do something towards lessening the enormous cost of the strategic line. For the Tuat oasis is undoubtedly rich, and gets its cereals, its meat—whether preserved or in the form of live stock—its cotton stuffs, its domestic and other utensils, its weapons, its soap, and above all its candles, so dear to the Arab, from a long distance off.

To set against these imports, it exports its dates to the four quarters of the globe, and owns such immense quantities that some of the poorer families live entirely on them, and they are the only food of all domestic animals, horses, camels, and mules, not to speak of the enormous stock which goes bad every year. The Tuat oasis also produces donkeys of a select breed, much sought after in Morocco, as well as the striped silks called haïks, in weaving which the women excel, beautiful and delicate basket-work, passementerie, embroidered purses, and fringes, all made by the wives of the Tuareg warriors.

The Gurara oasis, in which villages are grouped in rather a quaint way about a lake with very little water, produces very much the same commodities as does that of Tuat. Moreover, the soil of

the Gurara districts is unlike that elsewhere, and there are actually certain vegetables which grow wild in it, such as cabbages and sorrel, the latter of a quality no cook would despise. To those who know the desert, the springing up of these wild vegetables appears little short of miraculous. Gurara is also celebrated for its skilful gardeners, negroes with a dash of Arab blood, who sometimes migrate with their families to El-Aghuat, Ghardaya, and the *kusûr* of the Wâdy M'zab, where they are known as *Gurari*, and grow vegetables on square patches of the oasis.

As for the third sub-division of the highly-favoured districts of which Tidikelt may be called the advanced guard, it is of a very pleasing appearance, for, throughout the whole length of Messaura extends a valley forming one vast forest of date palms. And this Messaura wâdy is one with a real, visible watercourse, not a mere dried-up bed of a river; that is to say, it is a watercourse along which water actually flows for some eight days every year. A wonderful thing in a Saharian wâdy, for, to give but one or two examples, water flows in the Wâdy M'zab for two days only every five or six years, whilst in the Mia Wâdy it flows every twenty-five years as a rule, but twice it has neglected to do even that! Whereas all the eastern wâdys, that of Messaura above all, have never-failing subterranean rivers,

with the aid of which the palms are kept constantly watered.

After the assassination of Colonel Flatters, the prisoners taken by the Tuareg warriors escaped to In-Salah, where they were well received and kindly cared for. Later they were not sparing in their praise of the affability of the Aulâd el Moktar, the luxury of their houses, and the sumptuousness of their gilded furniture. Some allowance must be made for the over enthusiasm of the prisoners, mere nomads of the Desert, for it was, of course, easy to dazzle them. Still, in the narratives of the explorers of the Congo and the African lakes, we read that the Arab traders from Mozambique have gilded beds, silk draperies, and rooms with painted and carved decorations, all representing a kind of barbaric luxury, such as might also have prevailed at In-Salah.

The dealer in slaves soon becomes rich, and there is no lack of slaves, either in the Gurara, or the Tuat oasis. The population is divided into the sedentary Arabs and Berbers, and the religious nobles known as *Sherfa*, which is the plural of shereef, who, besides a large number of slaves, have in their service many *haratîn*, or half-serf cultivators. The *Sherfa* caste, which never takes up arms, the fighting being done for it by its slaves and *haratîn*, is bitterly and fatally hostile to French influence, the more so, because some



A TARGUI WARRIOR.

members of the great Géryville and Wargla warrior sect, the celebrated Aulâd-Sidi-Sheikh went with the French to In-Salah.

This, of course, is quite easy to understand ; the more the influence increases in the Tuat oasis of other marabouts, such as the Tijani Naïb, chief of the Kadria, or of the Aulâd-Sidi-Sheikh who lead the faithful Sheikhia, and the more the haughty Sherfa of the country see the followers who enrich them, and whose obedience gratifies their pride, melting away, the less effective for evil will be the action of the followers of the powerful Sheikh el Senussi.*

Amongst the various and mixed populations, intrigues and counter intrigues will, of course, continue. It will be the wisdom of the French, whilst mitigating its worst results, to keep this rivalry well alive, for nowhere does the Machiavellian proverb, to rule you must divide, apply more forcibly than in the Sahara.

I hope to give the results of my study of the women of the Tuat oasis, and of the Tuareg women of the south and east in another book, but I cannot

* This Sheikh is the founder of a secret society, widely spread in North Africa and Asia, with members it is said even in Europe. He is supposed to be now living in the interior of Tripoli, where he exercises great influence, an influence extending even to the Soudan, where he has attempted to interfere with the English. By some he is looked upon as a Mahdi, and he seems likely to cause the French some trouble in their organization of North Africa, but his power is greatly exaggerated.—TRANS.

refrain from saying a few words here on the last named tribe, the fiercest of all the people of the Sahara. I have a friend (?) amongst the Azgueur-Tuareg, for the excellent Targui Wen-Titi by name, brother-in-law of the great chief Aghitaghel, honoured me with his confidence on certain psychological questions. Truly, his views were by no means usual, and I can fancy him still as he held forth, a big burly fellow, wearing a hood



and a blue veil, and holding his spear in his right hand and his dagger in his left.

He was very severe on the Arabs—for to a Targui the Arabs, especially the Shaânba Arabs, are the great rivals of the Tuareg tribes, in the art of plundering—for hiding their women as they do.

“You see,” he said to me, speaking very slowly, “we warriors hide our faces, so that the enemy may not know what is in our minds,

peace or war, but women have nothing to conceal, for the enemy never approaches them!" Then he added: "The woman is the mother of good counsel and of wisdom. If there were only women amongst us, we Tuareg would vanquish the world, we should own everything as far as Paris."

This enthusiasm, expressed though it was in hyperbolic language, does honour to the Targuiyett, as the Tuareg women are called, that being the plural for Targuiya. The Mussulman yoke has not subdued their spirit, they have evaded it whilst accepting the dogmas of Mohammed. The fact is, these Tuareg tribes have too strong a sense of humour to make good converts. Can they, I wonder, have any Franco-Norman blood in them? I am afraid not, though there is something very attractive about the idea! It has been said that it was necessary to convert them to Islamism by force seven times in succession. And when before that they adopted the Christian faith, their religious belief cannot have been much more the result of conviction than was their later creed. That in olden times the Tuareg tribes were Christians, is a fact too well established to need discussion here. It has been accounted for in three different ways, some saying that Christianity was introduced from Abyssinia, others that it was the result of the influence of Christian Rome

in North Africa, yet others, that some of the Crusaders of Saint Louis of France remained in Africa after the death of that king, becoming later merged in the Berber tribes, and being with them driven into the Desert by the Arabs, a theory at which I hinted above. Whatever the cause, the Tuareg tribes retained many foreign superstitions, some of which it must be owned, such as the belief in enchanted forests and wonderful fish, are very like those of Brittany and other districts on the English Channel. They still wore the cross, which indeed is retained amongst them to this day, but for all that they remained heathen to the backbone.

The Targuiya or Tuareg woman enjoys real independence and exercises great influence. She ventures alone, on the back of her mehari or thorough-bred camel, into the remote districts of the Desert. She shares the councils of her husband, and if she survives him as a widow she inherits his power. Moreover, property is inherited amongst the Tuareg through the female line, and a child is the heir, not of his father, but of his uncle, for there is often really no certainty as to who the father is.

Poor, but intensely proud as they are, it is simply impossible to reduce the Tuareg to submission. They remain free, hating the Rûmis and Shaânba about equally. Listen to one of the satirical songs

which the Targuiyett improvise on the Shaân-biyett, about whom they really have none but hearsay knowledge. See how, with the spiteful hatred only women indulge in, the raillery stings and cuts, outraging all the most sensitive feelings.

“Ah! Ah! There she goes, the woman in the veil!

“She is afraid to show herself because she is so ugly.

“She knows well enough that she is just a big sack full of cold fat.

“A skin full of nothing but stupidity and vanity!

“She obeys like a dog, this bitch, the daughter of a bitch!

“When the warriors return from the fight she does not bind up their wounds.

“She thinks of nothing but sleeping, and adding to the size of her huge body.

“And when she catches sight of food she writhes with delight and neighs.

“Yes; she neighs like a horse at the sight of his fodder.”

Pure calumny, exaggerated calumny of course, is this fierce song of exultation over the Shaânbiya, for though, no doubt, she is stout for a Saharian Arab, I do not think she is stouter than any of her sisters of the Desert. I confess that, as far as

I am myself concerned, my sympathies are with the Arab rather than the Tuareg race. The women may be less intelligent and less energetic, but their mode of life has never changed since the palmy days of Chaldea, and they have not been altered by their modern environment simply because it resembles that of their ancestors; indeed, that environment has made on them a yet deeper impression, an impression intensified in its transmission from one generation to another.

Poor Shaânbiyett! The Tuareg tribes make fun of them, and the Arabs of other districts despise them. The Agha Jellul, who is chief of the Laârba tribes, said to me one day in his picturesque French:

“What do you see in these Shaânba women? Why, they are less beautiful on their wedding day than ours are when they are making kouskous!”

Truth to tell, they have few silk *robas*, few figured *maliffas*, few handkerchiefs brocaded with gold. Their garments are made of pink or blue linen, and their ornaments are of humble silver, not of gold. But for all that, their mode of life, their manners and customs, are identical with those of the nomad Arabs. And if you go with me to the dawar, to the few scattered tents forming a little world in them-

selves in the Desert, you will see a true specimen of the true life of the Sahara, whether of the east or of the west, of the Laârba, the Aulâd-Mia or the Aulâd-N'ssa.





CHAPTER XV.

LIFE IN THE DAWAR AMONGST THE NOMAD
ARAB TRIBES.

THE dawar is beginning to wake up. The first faint rays of dawn have but just begun to appear in the East, yet already the old men have all come out of the tents to make their morning prayer, the prayer of El-Fejûr,* beneath the wide dome of the quiet sky.

Yes, the prayer of El-Fejûr, into which are gathered up all the tremors of the dark night, scarcely past ; all the feelings induced by the awful silence, when all light is absent ; the silence of utter nothingness, when the creature, all too conscious of his weakness, cries aloud to his all-powerful Creator :

“ In the name of the All-Merciful and Pitiful, I seek a refuge with the Lord of the Dawn, against the wickedness of the beings created by Him,

* This is the same prayer as the *Subh*. The word comes from *Fejr*, dawn.—TRANS.

against evil and night, when they overtake us suddenly."

The voices rise as if the petitioners were in despair, then they gradually drop, and the words come slowly, softly, musically, persuasively, breaking at last into sudden sobs. And as one listens, one seems to hear the sighs, the complaints, the groans of all humanity. The race which daily uses a prayer such as this may be degraded,



torpid, what you will, but for all that it assuredly retains some noble souls imbued with profound faith in God, profound pity for their fellow creatures. This prayer breathes forth, no doubt, emotions and feelings different from our own, but not so different as to exclude our sympathy and comprehension. Such a petition applies alike to the solitary and the social life, and nowhere do the solitary and social life so nearly touch each other, or so nearly merge the one in the other, as in the dawar.

The faith represented by that prayer is needed to enable the people of the dawar to bear their terrible isolation in the midst of the oppressive vastness surrounding them ; its wide charity is needed to aid them in rearing their orphans, caring for their aged, nursing their sick, aiding their infirm, and I must add that what may perhaps be called its brutality, which is but a form of combativeness, is an absolute essential in the struggle for life in the Desert.

But now the little ones in their turn slip out from the tents into the open air. Their big black eyes gaze at the grand scene before them without comprehending it in the least. To them the glorious sun, rising in his might from the sandy bed, suddenly brings the day, which nothing can dim till the evening, when his equally sudden departure ushers in the dark night that swallows him up. The young men come out also, still half asleep, enervated by the long hours of repose. The women alone, busy with their domestic affairs, remain in the canvas home. They can be heard calling to each other or scolding, asking for wood, reproaching those who have not yet gone to fetch the water they want.

"Patience, patience," mutter the old men. Then, shaking their heads, they quote to each other the Moslem proverb : "It is better to be patient than to desire ; it is better to hope than to despair."

By degrees, however, the hearths begin to glow, thanks to the last sparks of the fire always carefully kept up through the night. The bad water from the neighbouring *r'dir* is boiling in the saucepan, and the penetrating odour of the *caouah*, now in general use, fills the whole dawar.

Of course, the tents of the dawar are only pitched for any length of time in places provided with water. The term *r'dir* is applied to the little pools left in the impermeable soil by previous rain, or which has been obtained by infiltration.

When the *caouah* is ready all are summoned to drink. "Drink big ones, drink little ones," and they all drink, munch up a few dates, and wipe their mouths on their burnouses. Then the children run away, and the men and the women who have come to years of discretion exclaim: "Thanks be to Allah! Praised be the Lord, who understands men and provides for their needs!"

The morning wears on. The heat will be bearable until about eight o'clock. The work is now begun, which will be finished without fail in the evening, when the heavy shadows that usher in the night have fallen.

All the work of the dawar, which, by the way, is by no means hard, is done day by day



AN EMBROIDERER ON LEATHER.

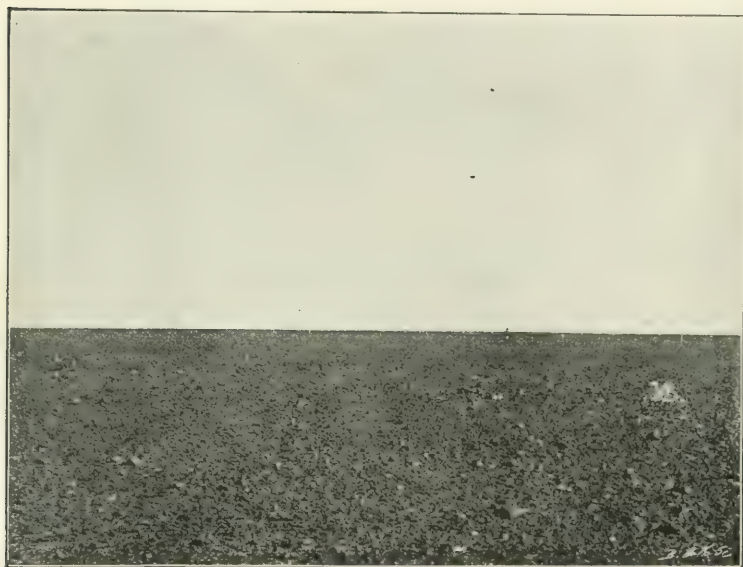
in this way, during the few less painful minutes of the day : when those who do not know what temperate climates are, imagine there is a certain freshness about the air. Husbands and brothers go off to fill the water skins, to collect brushwood, or to seek for pasturage or a fresh spot containing water. Some have to look after the animals, which is a light task enough, others are sent to kill vipers. Belgacem sharpens his razors, Messaud mends a saddle, Bâilich sews a gandura. But the most important part of the labour falls on the women, or at least so they persuade themselves and try to persuade others. "Oh, Zorah! Oh, Aïsha! Oh, Yamîna! What worry, what a lot of trouble we have! To beat the butter, to grind the grain, to knead the bread! . . . to mould the clay for pottery, to weave jerbis, to spin wool from our sheep—wool so white that that of the North cannot possibly be more beautiful. We are exhausted with fatigue, we have been at it all long enough, beating and rubbing the wool, washing it with native soaps, and then rinsing it out flock by flock in the stream in the nearest wâdy, which is such a long way off."

A relative activity then is going on in the dawar. Would you like a glimpse of the inside of a tent? You can very well imagine what the outside is like. A great expanse of stuff, made of bands of

brown woollen material stitched together, stretched over poles fixed in the ground, and kept in place by pegs. Here is the whole establishment, the residence of the entire family, separated into two unequal parts by a tissue division. But such as it is, it is a true home, and the primitive tissue division is the unmistakable sign of civilization. It is only the most unsophisticated of savages who have one common lair for all. There is no need to go to Australia or New Caledonia to meet with such lairs, for I have seen whole families of European origin—Montenegrins, Wallachians, and Ruthenians—with their beasts and cattle huddled beneath one skimpy awning. What does it matter to me if the Arabs have evolved this division into two parts in their mobile dwellings? I find in it an indication of feelings more refined than mere instinct, a suggestion of reserve, of a desire for privacy, and many other things on which I need not dwell.

Do not, however, jump to the conclusion that every tent is a delightful retreat. Oh, no! very far from it! There are too many things wanting for that, and one of the first of these is cleanliness. The carpets and *fréchias* used as beds are piled up anyhow, and are full of holes. In one corner is a bale of camels' hair, in another a *mutchatchu* is asleep. From the tent poles hangs a fox's skin, and in the chest is some harness, with a lot of

rags and some old broken pots. The drawbacks under which work is done in the dawar are great enough, but they would be still greater if it were not possible to take refuge in the open air, amongst the sheep and goats, the remains of yesterday's



cooking, camels' saddles, torn bags, broken bassurs or palanquins, wooden platters, baskets, saucepans, and sieves for straining alfa, etc. But fortunately this resource of the open air is there, and it is constantly turned to account. It is with the vast wastes of the desert around us, and beneath the immense dome of vivid blue sky, that we pay our visit to

Fatmah, the wife of the tall and thin Taieb-ben-Schetti, and watch her at her daily work, in company with her mother, El-Haja, her daughter Kerah, and her young sister-in-law, Mesauda the happy.

I hope when you have finished reading my account of house-keeping here, that you will be able to undertake the charge of any tent, no matter which, in the dawar.

We must begin at the very beginning, that is to say, with the grinding which converts grain into flour.

The mill used by the Arab women, the soft sound of the pounding in which is heard as soon as a dwelling is approached, does indeed emit what may be called the "Song of the Hearth" in the Sahara, just as on the hearths of other climes does the chirping of the cricket or the bubbling of the boiling pot. The mill supplies material for the *kouskous* of festive evenings, the *kessra* of every-day life, the broth of invalids, and of the poor who have no hearths of their own, as well as the so-called *ruina* of the traveller and the warrior, which is made of corn first parched and then ground, and is carried in the hood of his burnous by the wayfarer, who eats it just as it is, moistened with water. The mill is under the special benediction of Allah. The two little grindstones of these mills, the upper one of which is

worked with a handle, are not merely necessary accessories of the Arab *ménage*, they are actual ingredients of it, and without her mill an Arab woman of the South would no more seem to me a true Arab woman, than she would if she wore a cap.

Mesauda and Kerah are turning the mill this morning. Look at them, seated on the ground opposite each other, with the mill between their knees, working it slowly and rhythmically, the drapery of their loose robes falling back and displaying their beautifully moulded arms as they make the curious alternate motions of the handle. They stoop more than is necessary; for, like children, they play over their work, laughing as they finger the reddish flour falling into the sheep's skin spread upon the ground beside them. They throw pinches, even handfuls, of the flour at each other, and become sprinkled with splashes of it, giving them a very funny appearance.

"Oh, thou white one!" they cry: "Oh, thou sweet one!"

The mother, who is making butter a little way off, indignantly remonstrates with them.

"Oh, Mesauda! Oh, Kerah! it is sacrilege to waste flour like that. Thou mightest as well tear a page of the Holy Koran; thou mightest as well think evil of the Holy Prophet, whom may God bless, he and his family, and give them health!"

Then the girls, piqued at being chidden, get angry; Fatmah, without leaving her butter, gets angry too. They are good-for-nothing girls, she says, Mesauda has been no use since she began to give herself airs; yes, since she noticed how the handsome Ahmed looked at her. But the handsome Ahmed is not really giving a thought to Mesauda, she may be sure of that. He prefers the girls he can see in the towns, and who never say him nay. And even if Ahmed did admire her, is that any reason why Mesauda should be so conceited and so idle? And Kerah, too, she is just the same, imitating Mesauda's bad example. Stupid children! Why can't they be reasonable, and do the very little work asked of them properly? Scarcely an hour's work a day!

Mesauda, who is now furious, replies: "We do things because we like them, because they amuse us. The Sidi," as she calls Taieb-ben-Schetti, the father of Kerah and her own elder brother, "never gave orders that we were to work."

And, crimson with rage, she gets up, and leads away Kerah, who looks very uneasy, as a tame pigeon might if persuaded to fly off with a wild dove.

"By Allah, you are a pair!" cries Fatmah. "What! you would leave the mill! Oh, you are two wicked girls, who——"

But the grandmother, El-Haja, who is full of indulgence for the children, interrupts the blasphemous speech. Smiling and sighing, she says :

“ Take care, oh Fatmah, that thy tongue does not lead thee from the straight path. What do you expect ? It is only because they are young. They will have time enough to work when they are married.”

As she speaks the good old El-Haja goes to the innocent mill, which has remained on the ground as if it awaited the hand to set it in motion again (this is El-Haja’s expression, not mine), and the dear old lady sets to work herself, turning and turning the handle. Then she sifts the flour from the grit, reciting a prayer the while, the litany of the hundred names of the Lord, the All-Powerful, the Creator, the Sanctifier, the Pitiful, the Merciful, etc., winding up with “ Allah is greater than all.”

Meanwhile Fatmah, who is now calm again, has gone on swinging the skin containing the camels’ milk to be made into butter. The brown object, hung from two poles, sways backwards and forwards in regularly graduated jerks, in which there is more skill than would appear. In spite of the heat, butter will be produced, but it is allowed to get rancid on purpose, and it is always flavoured with a horrible grass which smells of assafoetida.

"The butter," or *d'hann* as she calls it, "is very good to-day," says Fatmah to El-Haja.

"Well, the Sidi can eat it *insh Allah* (please God) with the *kessra* and so can the boys. As it happens, we had nothing left but a few dates."

"Mother, look at the sun! Is it not time to think about the *kessra*?"

Fatmah says this in a tone which betrays, better



than any commentary could do, the fact that it is the grandmother who sees to the mid-day meal, for El-Haja is the head baker and cook of the tent. And sure enough, the old lady, without leaving her place, draws towards her the big *gueça*, or wooden bowl, in which a fowl has been soaking for some time. In it, with the aid of a little turbid water—for, alas! the people of the dawar have no water

that is not turbid—she damps some of the coarse flour just ground. Then she rolls the paste thus produced into a ball. Observe, she has added neither butter, salt, fat nor leaven of any kind, for the magnesia in the water takes the place of any other ingredient. The paste is already made, absolutely finished, there is nothing left to do but to put it into the oven.

Where is that oven ?

Truth to tell, it is simple enough. El-Haja is going to make it, or rather to demolish it ; for, to begin with, the fire still burning in front of the tent, quite close to the entrance, must be removed. You remember the fire, do you not, which was made for preparing the *caouah* ? Well, El-Haja sets about removing it, aided by the clumsy little fingers of the *mutchatchus* who are playing about ; some are her own, that is to say, the children of her son-in-law, the others belong to her neighbours. That does not make any difference ; they all call her grandmother, and they all press about the fire the more they are told to keep away from it, and not to touch it. “ Oh, Saïd, do not tear thy gandura,” and then, “ Oh, Nassur, take care what you are doing with the cinders. Come, come, do as I tell thee ! When the Prophet (may Allah preserve him !) was a little boy living with his nurse Sahdïa (may the Lord bless her !) he obeyed her in everything. And when the virtuous Sahdia

said to him : ' Oh, Mohammed, do not dig up the sand with thy left hand,' Mohammed never used his left hand again, never ! never ! So he became the friend of God, the venerated, the Father of the Faithful."

From this harangue you will guess that El-Haja is actually digging in the sand, with the aid of Nassur and Saïd, Kheir and Mabruka. She makes a hole of wide extent, but little depth, just in the hottest place, cleared of coal and cinders. "Aye! yah!" screams Saïd, "the hole burns my fingers." El-Haja takes no notice of him. The moment is far too solemn and too grave. I am reminded of the French cook on some fête day, who with anxious mien awaits the moment for putting her masterpieces in the oven. Now look, Saïd, Nassur, Mabruka! El-Haja is putting the ball of paste in the middle of the hot hole in the naked sand. Then she quickly covers it over with the lukewarm débris of the previous fire. Now bring the brushwood, the twigs, the scanty wood of the Desert, for a brasier must be made on top of the oven, which is to be heated from above.

I have not quite told you all yet ; do not cry out with disgust, as you read further. This useful brasier, this furnace, which is to draw slowly and not to be too fierce, do you know with what El-Haja feeds it? Well, not to put too fine a point

upon it, with camel dung, which makes capital fuel, simply invaluable in the Desert, and which there is nothing to replace. Some was used this morning in the fire for making the coffee, and a bit not quite burnt away may have actually touched the excellent kessra. All the world will tell you that camel dung is not dirty. El-Haja would deny that it is, so would Fatmah and her husband Taïeb-ben-Schetti. So would Kerah, and even that conceited girl Mesauda.

No, no, ye people of Europe, there is nothing disagreeable about camels' dung. The sand of the Desert purifies all it touches, still more all it covers up. How can you suppose that the kessra of the tent is anything but clean and sweet, nay more, delicious and scantified ?

“ Then said the holy marabout to the man, ‘ As a reward for thy piety and the services thou hast rendered to me I will, if God permit, give to thee as wife the daughter of the Sultan. ’ ”

The grandmother is telling a story to her willing helpers whilst she watches over and feeds the oven above the kessra. This is a departure from her usual custom of only telling stories in the evening. But Nassur must be amused, for he is not very well, and that is considered quite excuse enough for him even if he has been naughty. Allah, who sees all, will pardon the fault because of the intention.

“ ‘ How can you make me marry the daughter of the Sultan ? ’ asked the man.”

Here ensues a parenthesis. El-Haja explains how impolite such a question was. No one, big or little, should ever allow himself to ask rude questions. So little Kheir dares not ask the



question trembling on his lips, “ Grandmother, what was the name of the man ? ” Fortunately, El-Haja seems to have guessed what he wanted to know, for she went on :

“ The man was called Ali-ben-Kaddûr, and he was a good Mussulman, walking without stumbling in the ways of Allah. Just for that and that only,

his rudeness was pardoned by the marabout, and the marabout deigned to reply to him : ‘ Oh, my son, be not anxious about the dealings of the Divine Wisdom with thee, Allah knows best. Follow my teaching and all will be well with thee. Pick up the stones thou seest all round about us. The bigger they are the better. Fill the skirt of thy gandura with them. Go on picking them up, do not be afraid of the weight, for nothing but the burden of sin need be feared, and may Allah preserve thee. Amen ! ’ ”

El-Haja imitates the scene in pantomime, stooping down and picking up imaginary stones to put them into an imaginary gandura. Whilst she is thus employed the young girls approach her, the timid Kerah and the conceited Mesauda, who have now got over the sulks. “ *An Hekaïa* ” (a story), they cry ; “ oh, how splendid.” And, in spite of the increasing heat from the oven, they squat down round the fire of camels’ dung. The grandmother has now six eager listeners.

“ ‘ Oh, Ali-ben-Kaddûr,’ resumed the marabout, ‘ go to the Sultan with thy stones, and say to him : “ Oh, noble upholder of religion, noble Prince of the Faithful, I come to ask thee to give me thy daughter in legal marriage, and I bring thee some stones as her dowry. ’ ”

“ By Allah ! What an idea ! ” cries Mesauda,

the only one of the audience who dares to express her opinion.

“Hearing these words, poor Ali-ben-Kaddûr felt his very heart and liver turn cold. ‘Surely, when the Sultan sees these stones he will get into a just rage. He will say to his *mokhazni*, “Stone that insolent fellow, that wretch who dares to offer those pieces of rock to me!”’ So, as Ali-ben-Kaddûr, the man of little faith, was marching towards the Palace of the Sultan, he threw the big stones on the ground like this, as if he didn’t know what he was doing All the time he was thinking ‘that pointed one would have killed me when they began to stone me; bah, I’ll throw it away. This big one would have broken my leg, bother! away it goes! This rough one would have torn the skin off my head, away it goes!’ And if the holy marabout had not accompanied him, *insh Allah*, he would have thrown them all away, forgetting that a good marabout should have no will of his own, for that which is written will happen, whatever he does. It is Maktûb. At last; one of the two throwing stones away and the other looking on, they arrived at the Palace of the Sultan.”

The audience listens with bated breath, all the more because the narrator has paused for a moment to take a necessary look at the kessra through a little hole *ad hoc*. Some men have now actually

joined the little boys and the young girls, and even the handsome Ahmed himself is hovering, like a falcon over its prey, round the group by the fire, amongst whom is the beautiful Mesauda.

"*Zid! Lalla El-Haja! go on!*"

The grandmother carefully notes the behaviour of Ahmed and Mesauda; she also gives a search-



ing glance at Kerah, for who can tell at what moment Shaitân may first whisper his evil counsels? However, she goes on:

"So here they are, arrived at the Palace of the Sultan. Silly Ali-ben-Kaddûr is trembling with fear. He feels his teeth chattering, going clouk! clak! klik! like the bill of a stork. Then the holy marabout, who pretends he has noticed nothing, issues the order, 'Go to the audience chamber of

the Sultan, ask of him the hand of his noble daughter and present to him thy beautiful stones.' Ali-ben-Kaddûr, almost as dead with terror as if he had been killed the year before, is obliged to obey. As he goes along he keeps groaning to himself, 'Oh! oh! oh! oh! my beautiful stones, my poor beautiful stones, they will do finely to stone poor Ali-ben-Kaddûr. Oh! oh! oh! oh!' Oh children, what a man of little faith! There he is approaching the throne of the Sultan. Here he is actually addressing the Sultan. 'Oh, all powerful lord, be thou about my head and about my eyes! Be generous to me. Do not kill me, but grant to your humble little one the hand of thy noble daughter. Accept as dowry these little offerings I have brought with me against my will. Oh, do not kill me,' and his knees knock together, and he casts down his eyes as he turns away, muttering to himself all the time, 'Oh, dear me! oh dear! oh dear! oh dear! Oh! oh! oh!'"

The audience is consumed with delight at the old lady's realistic imitation of the terrors of the cowardly Ali-ben-Kaddûr.

"'Oh dear! oh dear! oh! oh! Ah! ah!' All of a sudden his terror is redoubled. Aye, yah! yah! The awful hand of the Sultan is stretched out towards the stones and grips the gandura as if it were some coveted prey. It is all over now! Ali is dying of horror. Brou! Brou! Brou! Brou

Brou! When lo! oh marvel of marvels! When lo, suddenly"—the old lady pauses.

"When suddenly! oh, grandmother! oh, Lella El-Haja! go on, go on. *Zid! Zid!*"

"When suddenly the Sultan says grandly, but kindly: 'Oh, my son, oh Ali-ben-Kaddûr, not only do I give to thee my daughter to do with her what thou wilt, but I make thee my *Khélifah* (representative) in thy province, and my heirs to come will thank thee for having enriched my throne and my treasury.'"

"Thus joyfully did the great, the magnanimous, Sultan speak, for lo! the stones of Ali-ben-Kaddûr had become changed into emeralds of huge size and exquisite colour; so beautiful, that beside them those of the wife of a caïd would look mere rubbish, and the diamonds of King Solomon would be eclipsed by them, just as the light of the stars is eclipsed when the mighty sun appears!"

A murmur of admiration runs through the audience. The little ones open their mouths wide in their astonishment, the young girls shudder with a kind of envy of the bride who had such a dowry. The men, who are more sceptical, or, at least pretend to be, for all these people feel profoundly even the fictions they recognise as such, the men want to know how it all ended.

"How it ended!" cries the grandmother, "I'll tell you that in three words, although it is high

time I saw to my kessra. Ali-ben-Kaddûr, as proud as any vizier, went back home again, taking with him the daughter of the Sultan. She was a virgin, and more beautiful than the moon on the fifteenth day of the month. Besides his wife, Ali-ben-Kaddûr had received from the Sultan, not to speak of a beautiful sword and costly stuffs, one hundred camels, five hundred sheep, ten negroes, and twenty negresses, carpets, fréchias, all he could



need, to live very happily till the time came for his cup to be drained. . . . And the Celestial gardens will reserve the same happiness for all of you who walk in the way of the All-Merciful, the All-Pitiful Allah ! ”

After these last words a silence falls upon the group. But it is suddenly broken by the voice of little Nassur, who says to his cousin Saïd, in an aside, that everybody hears :

“ Ali-ben-Kaddûr was not polite, he was not

obedient, he did not believe, did he, oh Saïd ? But he got a lot of beautiful rewards, didn't he ?”

What shouts of laughter greeted the insidious remark of little Nassur ! The poor mutchatchu hid his face in the hood of his burnous. He would have liked to hide in the earth instead of the kessra, which was at that very moment taken out, all smoking hot, from its hole. His little Arab soul cannot be consoled for having called attention to himself and made the grown-ups laugh at his expense. He sighs all through the meal, whilst he is eating the portion of kessra given to him by his father in a corner of the tent. He still goes on sighing when, the frugal repast over, the adult and old men chant the prayer of *Dhohr* or noon.

Then he forgets his troubles in the heavy torpor of the inevitable siesta in which everybody in the dawar indulges after the mid-day repast.

After the siesta, the relations between the different families of the dawar can be more easily studied than in the morning. With the exception of Aisha, the wife of the Kebir, who, accompanied by her negress, her mother and her sisters, goes to the wâdy, all the women are at leisure, that is to say, there is nothing they are obliged to do, so they go and pay visits to each other, now to one, now to another ; quite unlike the visits paid by Bakta to the women of the kasr which we described in a previous chapter, but they are visits for all that,

informal, free and easy, very much so in fact, in which, under pretence of spinning wool, they gossip and talk scandal, retailing the latest misdemeanours of their neighbours, etc.

“The camel sees not its own hump,” says a proverb of the Sahara, “but it sees that of its brother.”

They begin by picking the character of Aisha, the wife of the K  bir, to pieces. Why does she go



herself to wash the linen at the w  dy instead of just sending her negress? Why, just to make people think that she has such a lot of *maliffas* and *ougayas* that one poor negress cannot wash them all! By Allah, what nonsense it is! And then—it is our friend Fatmah who adds this insinuation—“she has perhaps yet another motive.” “What is it, oh Fatmah? By the Sidi Abd-el-Kader, tell us, do tell us!”

After much pressing Fatmah at last decides to tell. She declares that Aisha likes to play the young woman, the pretty girl, that she flutters about like a pigeon, begging her uncle to escort her to the river as if she were still a little bride needing to be taken care of, or as if there were Rûmis going about in the neighbourhood. "By the venerable Khadija, mother of the Faithful, isn't that last idea perfectly ridiculous? . . . unless"—that word "unless" loosens the tongues, the tongues which may compromise the salvation of men, and lose women their one chance of entering the celestial gardens.

"Unless she has good reasons of her own for thinking so!"

"Unless by always getting a burnous to dance attendance behind her veil she wants to disarm suspicion when——"

"When they see another burnous near not worn by a member of the family."

"Ah! ah! ah! How amusing you are, Fatmah!"

"Ah! ah! ah! You will make us split with laughter, like the frog of the oasis."

"It really is true that Aisha's manners are anything but proper."

"Well, but why did the Kebîr marry her?"

"One of the Aulâd Sidi Atallah!"

"Almost a beggar!"

Here some charitable woman intervenes by say-

ing that the accused, far from being a beggar, had brought to the Kebîr's household many carpets, and since the marriage had inherited sheep and camels. But she does no good, this charitable advocate.

"All the more shame to her, if she is rich, to behave as she does."

"And the Kebîr only took her for her money, for he has an eye to the main chance."

"Yes, we all know that, to our cost. He keeps tight hold of what he gets ; his right hand will never give anything to his left."

"He has forgotten the proverb : 'Marry a well-born woman, even if you have to sleep on a mat.'"

"But what would you have ? Is it not written ?"

"It is written !"

Then that strange silence, the outcome of the silence of the Desert, falls on them all, and they become mute, with heads bowed, at this reminder of the beyond, of Maktûb, or Fate ; which does not, however, mean quite the same to them as it does to Europeans, when they speak of resigning themselves to their fate. To them Maktûb represents the mystery, the power, and the magic of an often cruel WILL. Very curious and dream-like is their conception of the Angel-scribe, the arbiter of Fate of the Mussulman, who in the third Heaven writes in a register the future of men. They try to understand him, to make a mental picture of his appearance—his terrible appearance. The distance between his

eyes, as you know, was measured by the Holy Prophet, on that blessed night when he was able to ascend to the very Throne of the Merciful God. Ask El-Haja, she will tell you without hesitation that this distance is equal to that which a sturdy traveller could walk in seventy thousand days. Seventy thousand!—only from one eyebrow to the other!

El-Haja knows a lot of other things. Plying her distaff, now in a quiet corner where the old gossips congregate, now listening unnoticed to the chatter of the young girls over the doughty deeds of Mabruk or of Ahmed. She hears everything. She has learnt to understand the language of the stars and the meaning of what the sand and the wind say to each other. Of a happy temperament, she is yet able to aid others through her own experience of sorrow; and if there ever were such a thing as a female sage, I should certainly say that El-Haja deserved the title.

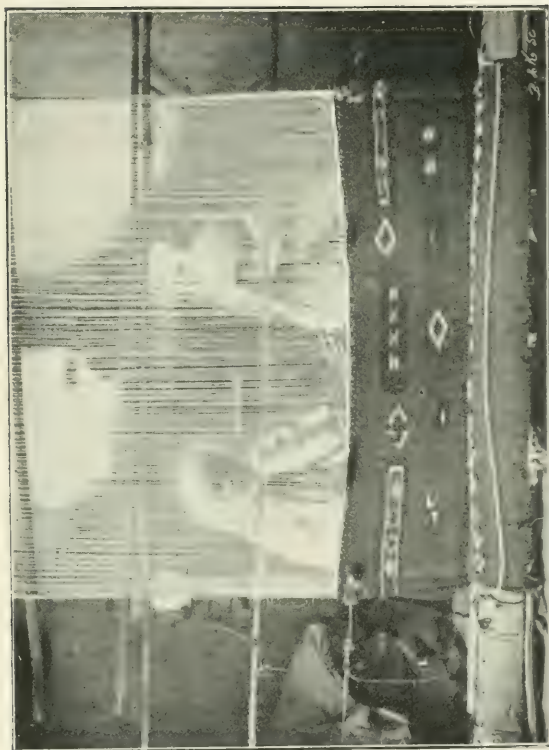
Very skilful is El-Haja in weaving the *jerbis*, those stuffs with a purple ground which to us Europeans seem too thin for carpets, too hard for bed-covers, too thick for clothes, yet which serve all these purposes in the Sahara, not to speak of forming the partition in the tent and the chief material of the palanquin.

El-Haja teaches novices the art of casting the threads of the weft from one peg to another and arranging these threads vertically in the

primitive looms, made of wood, string, and reeds. She teaches them too how to dye wool, and how to mix the different shades of colour ; but one thing she jealously guards, and that is the secret of the hieroglyphics ; those mysterious and cabalistic designs, such as squares, zigzags and arabesques, which represent sometimes an object, sometimes an idea, and sometimes a phrase. Only to a few initiated does El-Haja teach, and that grudgingly, this ancient writing, which she herself does not fully understand, enshrouding as it does the thoughts of races long since passed away.

The influence exercised by this old woman is good. Many a bit of scandal is stopped when she is by ; many a squabble is appeased by her mere presence ; for she is in harmony with the soothing spirit of the hour, for the hour of verity approaches now, the gilded hour of peace and calm which precedes the evening. The men are coming back to the tents which they left after the prayer of the 'Asha. The austere horizon is bathed for a time in a divine tenderness, and the dreary, meagre, restricted nomad life, so wanting in comfort and enjoyment, shares for a brief space the gentle charm.

Chattering suddenly ceases ; the women who have been busy over their household cares, silently disperse and rest from their toil, to gaze, with eyes half-closed and their little ones about them,



WOMEN WEAVING A TEKEL.

into the dim distance, in all the delight of idleness, the negative joy of contemplation.

Soon the splendour of the golden glow begins to fade, and the violet shadows of the tufts of drinn grow longer and longer upon the sands. The goats bleat and the camels draw near to the dawar. The supreme moment has come of the death of the Sun in full view of the spectators; the old men and many of the children prostrate themselves.

“*La lah il Allah Mohammed Rasûl Allah!*” *

It is the declaration of Mogreb or the faith.

The afternoon does not, however, always pass over so entirely without events. Now and then, very rarely of course, a caravan passes. Sometimes the *gum*, or native militia, are called out by the *Bailek* or government official, and immediate obedience to the first call is compulsory. Then ensue great agitation, confusion and all the bustle of preparation. The birth of a little camel, too, is almost as important an event as the arrival of a baby nomad, and causes a vast amount of acclamation and of running to and fro. Or, again, a wandering minstrel of the female sex arrives, who plays the tambourine, and whose presence is the excuse for dancing, full of passionate gesture. Nothing, however, so completely upsets the repose of the dawar as the death of one of its members. Of course, I mean the upsetting of the usual ways of

* No God but God Mohammed the Messenger of God.—TRANS.

the place, not of the effect on the hearts of the bereaved.

From dawar to dawar the news spreads rapidly and is eagerly commented on. Every one hastens on foot or on camel to pay the last duties to the deceased. The men come to carry the body, for the Prophet has declared :

“ Every step you take in carrying a dead body will be worth to you the remission of ten sins, and the substitution of ten good actions for each of those ten sins.”

The women come to mingle their grief with that of those more immediately concerned and to endeavour to console them for their loss, but if they happen to meet visitors not related to the deceased at a little distance from the tents, the most animated conversations take place. It is a grand occasion for gossip and the news of the different tribes is eagerly exchanged. The son of Musa-ben-Bashîr, of the Beni-Merzûg tribe, is going to marry the daughter of Abdallah-ben-Embârek, of the Sidi-Atallah tribe. The wealthy Tahar-beni-Salem, of the Aulâd-Sidi-Ziaïne, is going to repudiate his third wife, Gr'gaya, but he is keeping two and talks of marrying a fourth, which is likely to lead to complications in the future and cause food for gossip. It would be very dull in the desert if the men did not sometimes indulge in polygamy.

Suddenly, however, the talkers arrive at the tent where a so-called "white death" has struck down its victim; white death meaning a natural, whilst "red death" means a violent end, as in war, through assassination, or by accident. The women all at once begin to weep, to cry aloud and to tear the skin of their faces with their nails, as if the loss



in this family, of which they really know next to nothing, had driven them to despair.

And truth to tell, the despair, though sudden, is real. The nomad rarely sheds tears in the ordinary course of his existence, and the nomad women, except when they sob with anger or jealousy, are equally chary of weeping. These melancholy occasions act as a kind of safety valve

to the nervous nature of the nomad woman. She simply revels in grief, gloats upon all the sufferings of the past, and anticipates those she fears for the future. On the other hand, the women belonging to the afflicted family redouble their expressions of grief on the arrival of each new-comer, and a concert ensues which becomes ever more and more impressive, like the raging of the sea on the night of a storm.

“My father! my father! my father! my father!” they cry, the voices rising, swelling, vibrating, till the noise becomes deafening; now it dies down, now it increases again, until it breaks into one last effort, one long-sustained superhuman scream of an agony vying with that of all other suffering. Oh, the passionate tragedy of the funeral lament! How thoroughly in accord is it with the nature of these people, who put forth all their energies into every transport of woe, who are moved from their ordinary calm so rarely, but when they are moved feel so intensely.

“My father! My father! My father! My father!”

“Oh, my mother! Oh, my sister! Oh, my husband!”

Two cries in the two appeals always run into one word, as it were, full of convulsive feeling, penetrating through the bodily ear to the very soul of the listener. Each mourner addresses his

various laments to his own dead, whether the loss has been recent or was sustained long ago. A *ghualla*, or improvisatrice, adds to the clamour by playing on her *thebel* or tambourine, and chanting in her penetrating voice such a refrain as the following :

“ He was the pride of his tent.
He was the ornament of the dawar.
He was the bravest of the brave.
He was the honour of the womb that bore him.
He had the prudence of a jackal.
He had the strength of King Daoud (David)
And the patience of Job.
His hand gave alms secretly.
His tongue was gentle.
He taught his children to walk in the true path of Allah !
He was the pride of his tent.
He was the ornament of his dawar.”

These stanzas are presently interrupted by a fresh burst of grief. The women of the family fling themselves upon the body of the dead, who lies on the ground, wrapped in seven shrouds, if he were rich enough to afford such luxury, and covered over with a carpet. The women claw at their own faces, and all the assistants begin to claw at theirs. They rend their garments, and every one else does the same, or at least pretends to do so.

“ My father! My father! My father! My father!”

The tears flow in torrents, the mourners are almost choked with their sobs. Gradually, however, the shrillness of the laments of the younger and less really sorrowful assistants decreases, but the least thing starts them off again, and they re-commence their monotonous chant, a more wildly savage one, I do believe, than that of the mourners of olden times; a maddening, heart-rending lament, which slowly invades the deep silence of the Desert, and as slowly subsides.

The tears are, however, soon dried. Mourning for those not members of the family scarcely lasts twelve hours, and the day after the women set to work again to spin wool, weave *jerbis*, and back-bite Aisha, the wife of the Kébîr. So wags the world, even in the Sahara, indeed, above all in the Sahara, where the fatalism of the people leads them to look upon ruin and death without much regret. And when the evening comes, whether they have laughed or whether they have wept, the kessra must be prepared again as it was in the morning, if the men and the little ones are to have any supper.

So they begin the whole ceremony over again, and with it comes again the whole collection of stories appropriate to the time, for the traditional hour for story-telling has arrived. Before every tent and around every fire of the dawar, the mingled skein of romance is wound or unwound,

as the case may be, with all its subtle humour and dream-like pathos. Happy, in spite of all their miseries, are the people who know how to tell tales! Happy are the people who know plenty of stories!

For in these stories their somewhat coarse love affairs are touched with the glamour of romance,



although they neither know that this is the case nor wish that it should be so. Their heavy slumbers are lightened by facetious fancies, and they are rocked in their dreams on the voluptuous wings of the jinns or jinûneh and fairies they believe in.

Those who prefer visions of a more mystic character seek them in their hopes of the celestial gardens, the Paradise of Allah, whilst the very old and pious find their happiness in dreaming of the

them, that is to say of perfection or the state of ecstasy, the utter annihilation of self, in which the soul, set free from the body, flies away from its mortal covering.

Nearly all are sleeping now beneath the tent and under the stars. The Angel-woman has long since come to strew the blue sky with diamonds. Only the guardians of the fire still watch, and some few old men, repeating late the prayer of 'Asha :

“There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is the Prophet of Allah.

“Allah is greater than all. Allah akbar !”

Then follows the supplication from the Koran (Sûrah cxiv.) for courage, for strength to endure more bravely the terrors of the night now beginning :

“In the name of Allah, the Pitiful and Merciful,
Behold, I seek a refuge near the Saviour of mankind.
King of men.
God of men.
Against the wickedness of the hidden one, who suggests
wicked thoughts.
Who whispers evil to the hearts of men.
Against genii and against men !”

CHAPTER XVI.

ABOUT THE CAMELS OF THE NOMAD ARAB
TRIBES.

CAMELS of the Sahara, who have nearly shaken me to death upon your high and flabby humps, on whose dry and tasteless flesh I have fed, Camels of the Sahara, I am about to proclaim your virtues!

I will dwell on your endurance, which is greater than that of your brothers of the North, for if you are uglier than they are, more ragged-looking, more mangy, you are not a bit less robust. I will laud your fleetness—your relative fleetness, I mean—your proverbial and paradoxical sobriety. I will praise the hair of your meagre mane, I will laud the milk of your chaste spouses, I will dwell on the elegance of your little tail and the breadth of your softly-padded feet!

But after that, oh, Camels of the Sahara, you must permit me to cavil at your execrable characters. Will you allow me to enquire why your temper is so very peevish, and why you growl in such a very unpleasant manner? Why do you begin to snort

directly your drivers begin to load you? Why do you growl when they remove your loads? Why do you carry on as if you were going to be killed every time any one dares to approach you, or to



touch your primitive-looking harness with so much as a single finger?

Oh, Camels of the Sahara! do not reply that your other qualities are such that you can dispense with amiability, nor that your miserable lot prevents you from being gracious. Such a reply would be ridiculous. All wretched churlish creatures have made that plea ever since the world began. Allah

would favour you more, oh camels, if you did not sniff in such a sulky way, and if your spirit were not quite so rebellious! For, really, you are the only creatures in the Desert whose leanness is unæsthetic, and you are, moreover, the only



ones who, after rebelling for a time, have not resigned themselves to the inevitable in the very slightest degree.

However, in spite of all these exceptions to your virtues, I must admit your indispensability. But for you, oh Camels of the Sahara, the admirable country you perambulate would still be an un-

known land. I hear you growl that that would have been very little loss, very little loss indeed. Well, of course you would have escaped having to carry the weight of one female traveller and her luggage. But that does not really make any difference to you! And I could not do less now than sing your praises; yes, to sing your praises in all sincerity. I repeat, you are the only creatures without whom it is impossible to live in the arid plains of sand, for, without you, none could find their way in the pathless wastes.

Yes; I will praise you. You are to the poor nomad, carriage, horse, and cow. You will hold out without food for four days, and without drink for eight. You growl no more when you are hungry, you howl no more when you are thirsty, and you make no objection to your brown fleece being shorn when the women want to weave the roofs of their homes.

Why, when I acknowledge all this, should I quarrel with you again about a few other trifles? Because you are dirty, for instance, and do not smell very nice? There is not the slightest doubt that you would prefer smelling nice if you could. Is it fair to quote the occasions when you lose your heads and become (dare I say it?) *mahbûl* ("bound") to use a classic expression? When you give way to this peculiar state of mind, you upset all your comrades, and travellers and packages suddenly

find themselves kissing the grassless soil rather too fervently.

No, no ; I will not dwell upon your faults. No man is perfect, neither is any camel ! I prefer to look upon you as the humble martyrs you often are, victims of a horrible climate and the harsh treatment of man. You always work till you drop, and, perhaps, who can tell ? the sulky temper you are charged with is a presentiment of the lonely agony of your end, far away over there, when the ungrateful sokhrars abandon you to your fate, leaving you to die in solitude.

A great pity fills my soul when I think of you, I esteem you, and in the end I quite love you !

This is why, oh camels of the Sahara, who have fed me with your tasteless flesh, who have jolted me about on your high and flabby humps, this is why I mean to celebrate your virtues.

The caravan started at day-break with the loaded camels. The men were up long before the first rays of light appeared in the East, for loading the animals is a long business, requiring the greatest care, and when the loading was done the prayer had to be said, and after that came the caouah. Then at last, slowly, painfully, awkwardly, oh, ye camels ! you got up from your knees, stretching out your ugly necks, and your inordinately long legs. Bit by bit the caravan is in motion.

Let us suppose it is a convoy of dates, going

from the Wâdy M'zab to El-Golea. The men of the dawar have left their tents in good spirits under the guardianship of Allah, the All-powerful, and the guidance of a few elders of the tribe; joyfully they came, driving you before them, oh ye camels, on their way to take the *tellis* of dates to some wealthy old Mozabite, and now they joyfully start again, thinking of the profits of



the journey. Already in imagination they are touching with their clumsy fingers the silk maliffa and tinkling necklaces of some dancer whose affections they covet, but who is the dread of their wives, for it is for her sake that they depart from the right way.

And the leader of the caravan, perched upon one of your loads, swinging about on top of the pack-saddle above the various sacks, is

calculating and dreaming. When he has paid the tax he will hardly have enough over to buy a certain mule he is ambitious of possessing. As for indulging in any pleasure, alas! he must avoid all that now, no *fassedett* for him! It is not as he would poetically express it, that the snow has fallen on the garden of his youth, he is not yet old, and is, in fact, thinking of taking a legitimate wife soon, she will be the eleventh, to replace one he has just repudiated. But though not old, he is middle-aged, and has reached the period of life when the Mussulman becomes virtuous for fear of losing the joys of Paradise. But what struggles he will have against temptation! How hard is the path of virtue, how severe is Allah in the restrictions He puts on the faithful who would walk in the right path.

You hear him sigh, oh ye camels, do ye not? You hear the brave chief of the caravan sigh? But he soon controls himself, he resigns himself and repents having doubted the goodness of the Most High. "Which of the blessings of God have you denied?" he murmurs. Then he recites a whole *Sûrah*, and he regains his old zest for life, which is so full of relish when it is free, free in the great Sahara, as the wind from the South and the wind from the North.

Forward then, oh camels! Ouche! Ouche! Emchi!

Until the time of Moghrib or evening prayer, the caravan pursues its wandering way from tuft to tuft of grass, from grazing ground to grazing ground. Now it advances in single file, looking like a string of beads, now it widens out like the advance guard of an army, pressing on in undulating waves for its goal, like some tireless serpent, camping at last, it would appear, just because camp it must.

Then at dawn the next day it will start again with its loaded camels.

You are the very pillars of commerce, oh ye camels! you are the swift carriers of important missions, and you are not afraid of trotting (oh, what a trot is yours!) for thirty miles without stopping. But your rôle is most important, most touching, most intimately connected with your master's life, when the whole dawar is flitting from one place to another, when even women and children are seeking fresh pastures in a new district. Then you become the bearers of the sacred treasures, the *lares* and *penates* of the nomads, and you are in very deed and truth part of the Saharian family.

Oh wandering race, who shall draw the veil from all that those two words conceal of the inexplicable, incomprehensible mystery in which your life is shrouded? Long ago I sought the solution of the enigma amongst the Ziganes of the Hungarian plains, and now again I seek it here with no better

success. It seems to me that wide stretches of space entice the human race to travel. For all that, there are people in many parts of the world occupying apparently limitless plains, who do not lead a wandering life. They are poor, yet they abide where they are, they are short of food for their children and their animals where they live, yet they stop there. They would gain much by exchanging at a distance the products of their own land, but still they do not travel. Ingrain in them is their love of the same soil, just as in the nomad tribe is ingrain the necessity of constantly changing the soil on which they live.

Ever new, yet ever the same, the problem becomes ever more insoluble, why the Arab of the Desert, who knows of cultivable countries on the north of his own land, has never made any attempt to establish himself there. Still more incomprehensible does it seem that, although he has actually often conquered portions of those fertile districts, he has been content to pillage and deface them, never making the slightest effort to preserve them. Incurable laziness is not really the reason for such strange indifference, the Arab of the South is quite capable of work, even of hard work. The truth is, that he likes to wander, or rather that some unknown force, stronger than himself, wills that he should wander.

Even if I do not fully understand it, I too feel that

grand beauty of the Desert which prevents those who dwell in it from dreaming of any other beauty. I too can realise that to wander from sand to sand, and return to the old camping ground without ever retracing one's steps, is to live, as it were, in that beauty. Yes, I too feel it, though maybe I do not understand it.

Camels of the Desert! Gloomy Sphinx of the waste! I am quite unable to read the riddle you set me to solve, yea, or any of your other enigmas! So we will leave that question aside for a bit, and go back to the good fellows who, thanks to you camels, are about to move on, the nomads of our dawar. And having seen them decamp, we shall practically have seen, as it were at one stroke, the breaking-up camp of all dawars, for the ways of the nomads in the vast solitudes of the Desert are everywhere the same, and their customs do not vary in the very least.

Do not suppose—observe I am now speaking, not to the camels, but to my European brothers and sisters—do not suppose that the nomad has no particular aim in view, when he starts on his travels. Neither must you imagine that in making for his goal, a hundred and fifty, two hundred, or even more miles away, that he travels as we should, stopping as little as possible by the way. Not a bit of it, he will camp by the way, meaning to rest for a couple of days, but very likely remaining for fifteen. The

whole party halts beneath the walls of the towns of M'zab valley, and then beneath those of the kusûr of the Wâdy M'zi. This is what wandering means, as distinct from our own stupid way of travelling.

Let us look in at the departure of the little fraction



under the immediate control of the avaricious Kébîr, whose wrongs, and those of his much defamed wife Aisha, we described above. The dawar, generally so quiet, is now as busy and agitated as an ant-hill. The termite colonies which explorers in equatorial

districts come across, would certainly look very much like a dawar about to decamp, when they decide to leave their temporary ant-hill. "Ya Mohammed! ya Bachir! Ya Buhausah! Rûha fezza!" you hear on every side. And those who look after the housekeeping, or rather tent keeping department, are more busy than all the rest. "Bebbi Sidi! my Lord! my Master! mind you don't forget anything. I have lost this! I have lost that! Fasten the bassûr carefully, and this *caouah* simply won't boil! Ya Kérah! ya Mesauda! ya Ghraira! Ya Mabruka! Oh great Sidi Abd-el-Kâder!"

The tents are furled. You ought to see those tents when the pegs have been taken out of the ground and the canvases are swinging from the central pole, as if suddenly seized with delirium, or in the grasp of an earthquake. "Ya Fatmah! Ya Mabruka!" The voices of the women who are fussing about underneath the folds are smothered and indistinct, and presently the huge fabric falls down flop, just as a dead bird drops from the sky.

Then upon your backs—I am speaking to you again now, oh ye camels of the Sahara!—on your backs, with their cushion-like humps, are piled up innumerable nameless objects. Yes, objects, without name, without colour, without form. And sometimes on the top of everything else are perched a few venerable patriarchs, very, very old men, and venerated ancestors. As for the young petted women,

they are huddled up with the children in the bassûr, the palanquin already described, made of branches bent by the heat of a fire and covered over with red, violet or pink *maliffas*, the flaming sails of a fantastic vessel, subject to the pitching and tossing of the sea of the Desert.

For if you, oh, ye camels, are called the ships of the Desert, it must have been with some knowledge or prevision of the bassûr, that bark so completely open that its sole coverings are the maliffas, that cabin so badly fastened to your saddle, and so very insecure in itself. Sea-sickness is the result of travelling in it to all but the thoroughly seasoned. And I could wish my enemies—if I have any, and I am sure I don't know if I have—no worse torture than to have to travel some fifty miles or more in this pre-historic equipage. Oh, poor, unfortunate enemy! Pity him, oh, ye camels of the Sahara!

Arab women, however, are proud to submit to this martyrdom, for, through long custom, to ride in the bassûr is equivalent to a proclamation of youth and beauty. To suffer and be considered beautiful, and to have one's vanity tickled—what is more natural, and what more delightful? The old women, who with their attractions lose the privilege of riding in the bassûr, trot behind with the men of the family. They would not consider it the thing to get into the palanquin,

even if they were overwhelmed with fatigue. "By Allah, oh my son, do you take me for a bride-elect?"

Yes; the old women trot along in the hot sand. And the whole dawar is on the march, the camels with the baggage, the camels with the bassûrs—one to each tent at least—the women and the donkeys, the little boys leading the goats, and the men of different ages, all press on in the best of spirits, looking forward to fresh pastures in a new district. Surely you share their hopes, oh ye camels! bearers of the sacred treasures, the *lares* and *penates* of the nomads, and, so sharing them, you are in very deed part of the Saharian family!

The sight of you recalls many an impression, arouses many a memory, and evokes many a dream.

The melancholy chant of your drivers in the pure clear air thrills the ear like a caress. And when it is accompanied by the faint rhythm of the shrill-toned flutes, the Desert itself seems to break into song.

Yes, oh ye camels! ye recall many an impression, many a memory, many a dream.

The women get used to your very painful motions, and they actually manage, incredible as it may seem, huddled up as they are in the bassûr, to grind the flour for the evening kessra, holding

the mill between their knees. And the charming voice of the mill serves as bass to the chant of the sokhrars, the sounds, petty and fugitive though they intrinsically are, widening, deepening, broadening into solemnity in the boundless wastes of the ever-changing horizon.

Thus, oh ye callers-up of impressions, of



memories, and of dreams, do ye add to the happiness of those about you !

The women live once more through the happy journeys of their childhood. They recall the pride and emotion with which they went—in the nuptial bassûr—from the tent of their father to that of their husband. Oh, that wonderful day ! The smoke of the powder fired off in their honour took the form of broken grey clouds. The land-

scape traversed was just like this, or just like that, as the case may be. They saw that very same undulating dune of sand, that very rock glowing like fire in the intense heat of the sun. Then, when the night fell, the silvery wâdy scintillated beneath the moon rays in its setting of boundless sands.

Yea, oh ye camels! ye will ever be callers-up of impressions, of memories, and of dreams! This is why, oh camels of the Sahara, who have fed me with your tasteless flesh, who have shaken me up on your lofty and flabby humps, I choose to sing your praises.

CHAPTER XVII.

ON THE IDEAS OF THE SAHARIAN WOMEN.

I CANNOT help asking myself whether I have succeeded in making my readers fully understand the various characteristics which go to make up the woman, the eternal woman, of the Sahara—the ideas, the tastes of these creatures of instinct, the opinions of these ignorant minds, the superstitions of these childish souls, so agitated by the thoughts of the beyond.

The Prophet, when he denied all culture to a Mohammedan woman, made her an inferior creature who knows herself to be inferior. And it is only the wives of Caïds, Aghas, and Sherifs, with, it must be acknowledged, a few courtesans, who retain any traditions of the olden times, or of the ways of their great-great-grandmothers, who lived before the time of Mohammed, in the golden days of Arab life, when women too were intellectual.

Even then the Arabs were poor, but how beautiful was the dawn of the spirit, when lyric

poetry was born, when songs of love were sung among the sands of the desert of Nefood, near the sources of the Hedjaz in Arabia, in Mesopotamia and in Egypt, whither migrated their fathers' fathers in the good old days. Then the seven golden poems, selected as the most beautiful, were left exposed to the admiration of crowds within the walls of the Sacred Kâabah, said to have been built originally by Adam, and rebuilt by Abraham, now preserved at Mecca, where it is protected, by the devotion of the Faithful, with a huge cloth pall.* Then the women, who were treated with, chivalrous courtesy, sometimes distinguished themselves as authors. Trials of skill in verse-making were held before them, and they it was who bestowed the prizes on the victors.

But Mohammed came, succeeded in his religious ambition, and all was changed.

He drove out from the Kâabah the 360 gods who had been gathered together there by the piety of different families, and replaced them by the one true God, Allah. From a theological point of view, there is no doubt that this meant real progress, but, poetically considered, it was a disaster. I mean that it destroyed that latent poetry which every one of the old deities brought in his or her train, whether that deity were the Jehovah of the Hebrews, Mithra, who glowed with all the

* The veil or Holy Carpet renewed every year.—TRANS.

glorious light of the sun, the mysterious Isis or her husband Osiris, the powerful protector of the dead, the goddess Myliltta, the cruel but voluptuous Venus of Asia, or the gods of Tyre and Carthage, Baal-Haman, Beldir, Bakax, or Ifru, the Pan of the West, not to speak of all those who were adored under the form of stones or fruits. All alike drifted to the Kâabah, where even the creed



of the Brahmins was represented, and the name of Jesus Himself was not unknown.

All were driven out now, and with them went a certain indefinable something—a spiritual exaltation—an unconscious sense of glory in the individual soul, for which the fierce triumphs of the conquerors of later centuries did not by any means make up.

Under the heavy mantle of Islam perished also the liberty and intelligence of woman. Mohammed is supposed to have ameliorated her lot, but this is a profound error. What has he decreed about her? What did the angel Gabriel dictate to him about her?

1. He confirmed the rule of succession already in force.

2. He declared that a woman has no soul, or, at least, that her soul is not the same as the soul of man. A correct theory perhaps, and since then it has become truer than ever, only it does not do to publish every truth abroad.

3. That the number of legitimate wives should never exceed four, with as many slaves over and above as the master cares to take.

4. That fathers should no longer have the right to bury living daughters on the day of their birth.

I am pretty sure, and I have good grounds for my conviction, that these premature inhumations were really very rare. And as for the rule about the number of wives, that was made for the sake of the moral and physical well-being of the stronger, rather than of the weaker sex. For the disadvantage of living with three or with five legitimate rivals, if disadvantage it be, is, I should say, fairly equal. I do not see quite clearly what innovations in favour of women were introduced by

Mohammed, though his legislation against her interests is apparent enough. He wrapped her up in veils, secluded her, and forbid her, as it will be remembered, to practise any religious customs ; in a word, he separated her from man in intellect as he had already done in soul. He stifled her as he stifled the voice of the poets and of those who composed love romances. "They are senseless fools, inspired by the Devil," says the Koran, "they say what they do not do."

A fine speech from the merchant who won the heart of the portly Khadija, by knowing how to repeat : "two and two make four."

Just now I alluded to polygamy. The reasons for the decline, I might almost say the suppression, of the custom are many, but difficult to define, and to enter into them would be beyond the scope of this work, for to do so would be to study men, not their female companions. One question however I feel I have a right to ask, and that is :

What does the woman of the Sahara think of the present state of things ?

She thinks according to the way the wind blows ; much that is good and much that is evil, or, rather, she gives vent to her fleeting fancies in optimistic or pessimistic feelings as the case may be, yielding herself up entirely to those feelings with a kind of resigned frenzy, a fierce but fleeting passion, which is the very essence of her originality.

Jealous as her pride and her sensuality make her, the Saharian woman does not feel perfect security in the monogamy which is now the general rule. Hence she is always on the *qui-vive*, always anxious about the future, and apparently eager to keep in the straight path. Hence the way she gloats over being the only wife, a fact which panders to her vanity, and is the chief glory of her daily life.

It is not only the rival wives who have the privilege of exciting jealousy, it is felt as much for the *fassedett* in whose society husbands forget their duties and lose their money. Abomination of desolation! May Allah confound their audacity!

Very bitter are the tongues of the virtuous wives on this subject, when they get together in private, that is to say, when friends of the same age are alone, for if a mother or respectable elderly relation approaches the group of talkers, a sudden silence will ensue. If the newcomer should be an old grandmother, not a word is said on the scandalous subject under discussion, it would never do for the ears of the venerable saint to be shocked by it, "may the Prophet bless those ears and the twelve friends of the Prophet and the Angels Azrael and Gabriel. Amen!"

But the concert begins again, as soon as the old grandmother has turned her back.

"May she be accursed, daughter of a dog!"

says one. "May her tomb be desecrated the very day of her burial! May the Lord make her like unto the handle of a door, which ever remains on the outside."

The wives of the chief men in the Sahara, however, the ladies of the Desert, refrain from indulging in such very strong language as this, it



would not be considered good form to do so; although, as a matter of fact, they really suffer more from polygamy and from the rival attractions of *fassedett* than do their more lowly sisters amongst the common people. Their somewhat more advanced civilization only makes happiness rarer for them. They have no individual life of their own, such as is enjoyed by the lower classes;

they feel all the disadvantages of existence in the Desert, without enjoying the compensating advantages. No gossiping with their neighbours, no social gatherings for them, no mutual work. Idleness is their portion, only very rarely relieved by what is called a *dhiffa* or hospitable meal given by the husband, for which the wife superintends the necessary preparations from a distance ; but as it is men, not women, who do all the work, wait on the guests, and look after the roasting of the meat in the open air, the poor sequestered women have not even the melancholy consolation of listening to the chatter of the servant girls.

The number of ladies in the Sahara is, of course, very limited, but of those few, some are very intelligent, though they can scarcely be called well educated. They rarely have a chance, however, of turning their abilities to account, unless they happen to be left widows, with a son under age, who is the heir of his father's title. Their dreary, monotonous days are passed in the big tents of their husbands, decorated with carpets, and lined with stuffs of as many colours as those in a stained glass window. They are stupefied by perfumes, and gradually sink into a state of chronic ennui. Indeed the passion which rouses them now and then, is more like that of some haughty Oriental Sultana than of the free and easy lovers, the foolish virgins, foolish wives and foolish repudiated women,

whose hearts flutter and palpitate in the great Sahara.

Yes, love, sensual love, brief but passionate, the love of which poets sing, the love on which the Arab story-tellers dwell in the "Thousand and One Nights," sets at nought *les convenances* with many a Saharian woman, who is neither strictly virtuous nor really depraved, but something between the two; who is not exactly held in honour, but at the same time is not looked down upon. There are such women in every kasr and in every tribe, to whom, as in Arabia at the time of Solomon, the song of the Shulamite is the true song of love.

"I sought him, whom my soul loveth, I sought him, but I found him not.

"I will rise now, and go about the city, in the streets, and in the broad ways, I will seek him whom my soul loveth, I sought him, and I found him not.

"The watchmen* that go about the city found me, to whom I said: 'Saw ye him, whom my soul loveth?'

"It was but a little, that I passed from them, but I found him whom my soul loveth; I would not let him go until I had brought him into my mother's house, and into the chamber of her that conceived me."

* The night watchman is still employed, both in the kasr and the dawar.

I have often been asked what influence French ideas have had upon the women of the Sahara, since the occupation, and I reply, so far absolutely none. As for new ideas, all I have discovered have been ideas about the French or about French inventions which do not affect the minds of those who conceive them in the very smallest degree.

The horror of photography from which I myself have suffered so much, for I have had to resort to all manner of extraordinary ruses to obtain my ends, is the result of one of these ideas, not to speak of the fact that the Saharians think it a positive sin to represent the human figure, for has not Mohammed forbidden it? To them the camera is a personal enemy. The sokhrars of the caravans from the North have described it so well, that every strange object is taken for it. Women attribute to it the evil eye, and they believe that if their portraits are seen, they will themselves be carried off by force to be shut up in the harems of Paris!

The Sahara women have other convictions on the subject of the French, which have nothing to do with the photography they consider so terrible. For instance, they are quite sure that the Rûmis of Algeria, El Aghuat and Tuggurt—officers, officials, merchants, and all—have been transported so far from their own land as a punishment for great crimes. In their eyes they are all guilty, all under legal condemnation, all convicts, in fact.

Another general and deeply-rooted belief is that the French Government can make gold at will. Make no mistake ; that government actually produces that gold, makes it out of nothing by some magic recipe. Then it (the government) distributes it amongst its employés lavishly, without counting it. These employés do not even have the trouble of asking for it. They receive millions, the amount only limited by the difficulties of transport.

The women of the kusûr, such as the nomad Larbâa, who come most directly under French influence, have evolved an idea, and that of course a deplorable one, about French women. According to them, a French woman is absolutely depraved in morals, perfectly shameless, absurdly emancipated, but only too strong physically, for she does not pull out her grey hairs ! This is why, according to Arab matrons, so many Rûmi marriages are barren. Fatmah, Zorah, Kerah and El Haja will all assure you that the culpable negligence of the infidels about pulling out their grey hairs, makes it quite impossible for them to have children. The women of more distant tribes have not acquired all this information. Their ignorance of the people who have conquered their country is supreme. I remember once, when I went unannounced into a house near Wargla, that the mistress received me with screams and every sign of the greatest terror. Surprised at such excitement in a country I had found

friendly, I tried to calm her. "Don't come near me, don't come near me," she cried. "Oh *Râjil*, oh Devil!" She took me for a man, in spite of my thoroughly feminine costume. When her tremors were soothed, and her alarmed modesty had recovered from the terrible shock it had received, she confessed to me that she had believed there were no women in the country of the Rûmis, in fact, that the female sex only exists in the races of the Sahara! All the time she was talking she was looking at me out of the corner of her eye in a furtive way, much as we should look at some unknown animal, which may, perhaps, for all we know, be ferocious.

Without holding any special creed, or believing in any religion properly so called, the women of the Sahara are much influenced by religious ideas, the result probably of contact with the fanaticism of the men. And when old and young, without the knowledge of their husbands or their sons, go to take an offering to the pile of stones, marking the last resting place of some holy marabout, when they sacrifice a cock to propitiate some unknown divinity, or when they hang upon the bushes near their homes pieces torn from their garments, they are subject to fear, to an awful dread of a terrible destiny, a sentiment really quite opposed to that of the Maktûb, or the Inevitable.

For all that, however, the two ideas jostle each

other, I do not know how, in their brains, so that their characters are a mixture of almost careless gaiety, feverish pride, and melancholy indifference, combined sometimes with a highly strung nervous-



ness, resulting now and then in hysteria, more rarely in madness.

All nature seems to them to be instinct with life ; full of legions of invisible beings, marvellous creatures, such as jinns or jinûneh, ogres, vampires, demons, and even angels, whose aid, when given to mortals, is not without its perils. And then there is the awful ghoul, Tesawira, the soul of one

who has been assassinated, who tries to drag the living into his tomb.

The jinn, however, is the being who is most active, and is most frequently invoked. Like the goblin of the hearth amongst the Highlanders of Scotland, he is sometimes friendly, but more often mischievous. He is the familiar genius who breaks crockery, tangles wool, and revenges neglect by breaking a leg or otherwise upsetting the plans of those who have despised him. Nearly all the customs of the Sahara, which seem queer to us, are practised to please, or to avoid displeasing some jinn.

A large volume, perhaps many volumes, might be written on the superstitious legends and beliefs in the supernatural of the Sahara women. Add to these their faith in diviners, omens, amulets, charms, love philtres made from the brains of hyenas, cooling philtres, such as those distilled from a certain grass, which cool *bih-fih* (instantly) the ardour of the most impassioned lover.

On the subject of that most precious element, water and its uses, many are the ideas of the Saharian woman. I have already referred to some of them, and the religious importance of ablutions and purification amongst the Arabs is well known. During the time of mourning, no matter how long it lasts, none of the women of the Sahara wash themselves, they must not even roll the kous-

kous, or mould the clay for making pottery, lest they should soil their fingers with the damp substance. For the rest, women never waste water; from long custom they have learnt to do without it when they are obliged, and they are often deprived of it for a long time. I should rather like to ask, whether those who are so ready to criticise them, would keep as clean as they do under similar circumstances?

The people of the Orient (and here we are dealing with the emigrant Orient, so to speak) do not understand the necessity of making frequent toilettes. A fine head of hair is meant to be admired, not to be constantly combed. "Do you suppose that the angels Hârut and Marût, who were so handsome, but now, alas, are damned, re-curled their locks perpetually?"

"Instead of attending to such frivolities, ask pardon of the Lord, for He loves to pardon."

There are also superstitions connected with domestic remedies for illness. Sufferings are welcomed as salutary for the soul. When a man or a woman has been ill more than three days, his or her sins are forgiven. Allah said to the Angel on the left hand: "Leave off writing down his or her misdeeds," and He said to the Angel on the right hand: "Write down his or her good actions, and make them better than they are."

Innumerable, too, are the traditions of the Sahara,

some pleasing, some melancholy, all more or less mysterious. These traditions are repeated, believed in, acted upon. The secret Night when the earth opens is invoked, and legends are told of the roses, the falling stars, the butterflies, and the lotus flowers, which herald the approach to Paradise. To every animal is given a voice, to every bird a special plaint. Some of these fancies inspire those who indulge in them with real terror, and timid souls tremble when they hear the screech owl demanding blood, or the brown owl whispering fears to the heart of a mother. Poor brown owl. One day, long ago, her son, whose name was Jacob, went on a long journey, and never came back. The brown owl still calls him, still awaits his return.

“Rebia ja au la Yakûb !
 The spring returns, but not Jacob ! Jacob !
 The summer returns, but not Jacob ! Jacob !
 Jacob ! Jacob !”

The cry of the brown owl is seldom heard ; its grief is too excessive for much speech. Great sorrow is generally silent. But in spite of herself, her lament is heard on stormy nights, for then she is thinking of the dangers her Jacob must be incurring. “Jacob ! Jacob !” she cries again and again.

In a word, the ways of the women of the Sahara

are full of contradictions ; contradictions of feeling, of sentiment, but everything is more or less childish with them, even their dancing, of which they are insatiably fond. I have already spoken of the dancing of the women of Wargla, but the love of this amusement is general in the Sahara, and women dance before each other in a manner not a bit more modest than that of the *fassedett*, though it is decidedly less graceful. Between their cups of tea they give themselves up to posing in all manner of attitudes, twisting their bodies about in a manner often anything but pleasing, holding themselves rigid, whilst the spectators stare at them, and assuming indifferent, passionate, polite, or disdainful expressions, according to the mood of their audience. They seem to like to practise what will please the opposite sex when no representatives of that sex are present. Although they are not aware of it themselves, there is, in fact, something voluptuous about them, an unconscious struggling after an erotic ideal in their dancing, the ornaments they wear, and the perfumes they use.

To please ! To please ! That is their one desire, and they have so very few opportunities of pleasing the opposite sex. For all that, in this country where those who wish to be attractive have not yet hit upon the idea of low-necked bodices, they accumulate fine clothes, piling them up one on top

of the others, with a view to the delectation of husbands and lovers. Brocaded silks, spangled tulle, tissues of gold and silver, some real, some imitation, falling in straight folds, gleaming disguises, mysterious covering, suggesting the hidden charms. And all this glittering metallic lustre, this raiment of gold, is the very condensation



of the dreams of many races, the synthesis of all the confused mirages emanating from the sultry sands of the Desert. No idea has yet been conceived of any other luxury than that of sensuous form. Genii, angels, phantoms—whether infernal or divine—have no other; Paradise itself promises nothing more as a reward to the faithful.

Sacred draperies, these, such as were worn by matrons in the movable and venerated tents of

the patriarchal family in times long gone by. Unchanging forms, immutable lines, still everywhere in use except where tradition has been modified by the bad taste of the North. Immutable! How full of meaning is that word! For how many, many centuries have women aroused the love of men by the attractions of the same ornaments? Woman, eternally young, one generation rapidly succeeding another, blossom of the perfect flower that is to be, is ever there, even as one wave replaces another in the ocean, and the colour, the light, and the shade, appeal with the same force to the eyes of the men of to-day, as they did to those of past ages, and will appeal to others yet unborn!

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